**19th April 2015**

Luke 24:36b–48

For many years we used to put a banner up outside, between the trees, on the roadside, proclaiming ‘Jesus lives’. A few years ago it got nicked. Now we can’t just put a banner up saying Jesus lives – we have to be living witnesses to that fact.

A church minister was putting up a banner one Easter that said Jesus is alive! Someone was walking past at the time and muttered ‘’well that’s very nice for him – but what has it got to do with the rest of us?’

What does Easter mean. What does it mean to be witnesses of the resurrection?

This story of how the Risen Christ meets his disciples offers us some ways in which things have changed and how we should witness to the resurrection. I will suggest three things: It is about peace, repentance and power.

On the third day after the crucifixion Luke reports the disciples are terrified when Jesus appears.

Jesus appears to help them overcome their fears and doubts and find peace.

Unfortunately, the disciples do not recognize Jesus; they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus presents his hands and feet as a testimony to his identity – this resurrected life is an embodied one. The disciples are still wondering, though filled with joy. Jesus’ second proof of his identity is the request for food. By

eating a piece of fish in the presence of the disciples, Jesus establishes that he is not a ghost.

Then Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself..." The response of the disciples is a sermon in itself. Luke tells us that they "disbelieved for joy..." It was simply too wonderful to be true.

The election manifestos were published this week of all the main political parties, setting out what they would do in the event of them forming a government. Their individual policies ae now open to be scrutinised and debated. Like those disciples who met the risen Jesus there has been much scepticism and doubts – can you afford these policies, where will get the money from. Some scoff and believe it is all too god to be true. Others are more cynical, remembering how the Coalition government that formed at the end of the last election ignored most of their individual manifesto promises in the messy business of compromise to form a workable government.

On the one hand it is healthy to have doubts and ask questions. We shouldn’t expect too much. There was a good article in reform magazine this month about the election. It quoted the cynical mantra ‘if democracy changed anything, they’d abolish it’. But then countered by saying that those who have a problem with our form of democracy should go and move to a country that is non- democratic one then you might appreciate our freedoms.

However they agreed at a theological level that we shouldn’t expect too much. We will not see heaven come on earth through the ballot box. That doesn’t mean politics is not important or that policies can’t improve or degrade communities, it’s rather that culture eats policy for breakfast’. Over the long term it’s the character of citizens, the practices of solidarity (or selfishness) in our common life and the resilience of institutions that will determine our national future. One of the reasons we are so sceptical towards politics today is that we 9unconciously0 expect so much of it. If we have better expectations we are less likely to fall into whingeing scepticism that so plagues our political life.

The article suggested that we have to engage, it is not a consumer product. We have to ask ourselves questions as to what we really care about and quiz our candidates and parties on those issues. But also pray for those candidates. Politics is a bruising game and although it attracts it fair share of bullies and bruisers it also has some very thin skinned people who stand because they sincerely believe they can make a difference and they made a sacrifice that public life demands.

Can I remind you that we are hosting the election hustings on Tuesday May 5th. The next day we will also have an evening of prayer for our nation, as well as our world and also our church.

Despite the doubts, scepticism and bewilderment Jesus had faith that these broken disciples of his would be his witnesses. They would witness to the power of the resurrection and the risen Lord.

The first thing Jesus says to them is Peace be with you!

Although it is not in the REB version, in many of the ancient manuscripts at the end of verse 36 Jesus blesses the disciples with peace. This conventional Sabbath greeting, “Peace be with you,” marks a turning point from the fear surrounding the crucifixion to the joy that erupts in the coming of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost.

The resurrection declares God’s peace to us. Even though sin and evil had conspired to put Christ on the cross God had the last laugh. But God does not now seek revenge on those who had done such a thing to his Son. God does not now go on a revenge mission, settling old scores. Like in a Hollywood movie. The message is still the same as when Jesus was active in ministry before his crucifixion. Love, peace and forgiveness. Peace be with you.

At the heart of being a Christian is the personal turning away from sin and celebrating God’s forgiveness and centring our life on that deep peace from which nothing can separate us. The peace of Christ that passes all understanding. It is a spiritual experience – knowing that whatever ay happen to you – you are held tight in the love of God. You are at peace with God.

I remember reading the Shack – a fictional story of how a father comes to term with the abduction and brutal murder of his young daughter. The story wrestles with the timeless question ‘where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?’ The book is very thought provoking. In one scene the father meets God in the form of a kindly black elderly woman who likes baking cookies.

She challenges him: that he sees pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer or perhaps at least fundamentally untrustworthy. ‘The real underlying flaw in your life’ she says to Mack, the father whose daughter was killed, ‘is that you don’t think that I am good. Trust is the fruit of a relationship in which you know you are loved. Because you do not know that I love you, you cannot trust me...’

Mack says he doesn’t know how to change that. The reply he gets is ‘you can’t, not alone. But together we will watch that change take place. For now I just want you to be with me and discover that our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me’.

Mack still is caught up with the problem of the murder of his daughter. How can anything justify that? ‘We’re not justifying it. We are redeeming it’ is the answer he gets.

The resurrection of Christ is the start of a new creation: the redemption plan of God – to make good the world – to redeem it. We are witnesses and co –workers in that. The first words Jesus gives his disciples is peace be with you. Before anything else is said – Jesus comes with the offer of peace. No justification is needed no show of faith, no contrition or apology. Peace is offered right at the outset.

I know someone who had a nervous breakdown through worry and not feeling good enough, for God, for life. He had high standards and was hard on himself all the time until he collapsed under the burden. His Christian counsellor told him to meditate on these words of Jesus: ‘peace be with you’. He visualised Jesus standing before him, arms outstretched, hands open wide saying these reassuring words ‘peace be with you’. In Hebrew, peace, shalom, means fullness having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. The bible says you will not be truly yourself until you know you are loved by god and are in relationship to God. That peace is vital for every other type of peace.

Therefore there is a need for repentance. Repentance literally means changing direction, r changing one’s mind. Jesus opens up the minds of those disciples to understand the scriptures and how they testify about him and the meaning of resurrection. Jesus changes their thinking and their attitudes and their beliefs.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins go much wider than our own personal relationship with God. They are the agenda which can change the world.

Today’s world is full of disputes, large and small, only a few of which get into the newspapers. Nations, ethnic groups, political factions, tribes and economic alliances struggle for supremacy, each can tell stories of atrocities committed by their opponents. Each one claims that they therefore have the right to the moral high ground, and must be allowed redress, revenge and satisfaction. But it is usually impossible to give an account of a conflict in which one side is responsible for all the evil and the other side is a completely innocent victim. The only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness.

On Tuesday there will be the tenth annual Joint Israeli Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony. In it, Israelis and Palestinians come together to mourn those who lost their lives to the conflict on both sides and to call together for an end to the cycle of violence.

These ceremonies are crucial to expanding the new Israeli-Palestinian peace movement, a movement committed to making peace by connecting at a personal and human level despite the political and physical walls separating us.

The ceremony draws thousands of people, and the numbers grow with every year. It is jointly organised by “Combatants for Peace which was set up in 2005 drawing together those who have actively fought on both sides of the conflict but now realise that violence is not the answer.

One of the Israeli soldiers said one of the turning points for him was when he was in charge of imposing a curfew during an Israeli siege of the West Bank and he refused to allow a taxi full of children to get to a hospital for treatment. His wife had just rung his mobile asking if he could pick their children up from school. He couldn’t integrate any more the feeling of being so blind to the Palestinian children and so loving to his own children.

Last month we had our annual lunch for the Corrymeela Community – a non-denominational Christian organisation that has been working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland for the last 40 years. We have been supporting then since the 1980s and visited the community eight years ago.

I remember one story they told of how after the Good Friday agreement they invited members from the loyalist community and from the catholic community to meet together. A police officer and his wife were waiting in the reception area when a man walked in. Instantly they recognised each other. He was an IRA sympathiser who had been wanted by the police, and that police man had been involved in his arrest. Immediately the IRA man said he was leaving. But the policeman’s wife said you made all the effort to get here - why don’t you have a cup of tea first. They sat down over a cuppa and talked. They realised they had the same fears and doubts, the same struggles and needs. They came to a point of mutual understanding which opened up an opportunity for change in attitudes – which is what repentance basically means – a change in direction.

Last week we suffered the first acts of vandalism on our new youth centre. But thanks to CCTV and those who were present the culprits were found but confessed to their crimes and are going to put them right. In such ways we hope that there has been repentance and reconciliation – and hopefully peace.

The work with young people is building and some troubled teenagers are crossing our threshold.

A few years back I remember hearing Steve Chalke talk at Spring Harvest. He heads up the Oasis Trust that seeks to help build a better society and support those who ae most disadvantaged. He told the story of a boy called Sam. Sam had seen his father hack his mother to death. He had stood transfixed in the kitchen watching his father batter his mother into ultimate submission. Not surprisingly Sam now had behavioural issues. He was aggressive and had furious outburst of anger. His father had taught him how deal with anger and rage – through bloodletting violence. What hope was there for this boy?

Steve Chalke told how a little Methodist Chapel had decided that it was time to close. They had got too few in number and decided to close the doors. They offered the church to the Oasis Trust, the organisation that Steve Chalke heads up – that specialises in community work and youth work. Steve urged them to keep going and worked with the church to adapt their premises so that they could host other activities. One of these was an alternative learning centre. That’s where Steve Chalke met Sam and heard about his story. Chalke saw Sam playing pool with one of the members of the Methodist Chapel, a retired seventy year old gentleman. This elderly man beat Sam at pool, but Sam didn’t get angry or burst into a fit of rage. Through the love and care, the companionship and hospitality of this church, individuals like Sam were finding some hope. That game of pool, that elderly retired gentleman, a member of a small church that thought it had had its day, was in Steve Chalkes eyes, a witness to redemption, and a witness to the risen Lord.

 Repentance and forgiveness will be proclaimed to all the nations – you will be my witnesses. Eyes that are opened. Minds that are opened. Peace that is shared.

But we need power to be witnesses to the risen Lord.

It is a high calling to be a witness to the risen Lord. But we are not left alone, nor are we left to do it in our own strength. Immediately after the charge to be his witnesses, the Lord says I will send you the gift from my Father and you will be armed with power! The Holy Spirit powers us into action. Jesus did not command the whole world to go to church. Jesus commanded his church to go to the whole world.

I see so many people in this congregation who seem to be running on a different fuel to the rest of the world. It’s marvellous. Powered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the Risen Jesus. But being filled with the holy Spirit will make you frustrated, restless, burdened with compassion and love, energised into the purposes of God, struggling with doubts and fears, wrestling with the scriptures , needing repentance and forgiveness, believing in the impossible, experiencing the unbelievable. That is all here in this story and in the story of Acts – the early church – which we will look at in a month’s time after Pentecost. In the next month we will be considering Jesus teaching on the Holy Spirit in john gospel – so more about the power Jesus arms us with in due course.

May we know the Peace of Christ offered to us through the sign of resurrection and be witnesses to that peace in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.