

Sunday 11th April 2021

Service prepared by Nigel Mawdsley

Opening Prayer

Awesome God, whose son worshipped in Your Temple and spoke words of life and love: meet us in our worship and bring us into the Holy of the Holies, where the curtain was torn aside, and earth and heaven are joined in praise, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord and our Christ. Amen

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, in the call to be your disciples, we hear your call to fullness of life, marked by love and care for self and neighbour, where true community crosses every barrier.

Forgive us for the times we have been prepared to accept second best for ourselves and others, and allowed division and inequality to separate people from another and from you. Among the many voices calling for our attention, help us to discern what is life-giving, and give us the courage and determination to take up your way of life. Amen

BIBLE READING: John 20:19-31

SERMON

If I mention the words 'bank holiday' what images do these words conjure up for you? Could it be a time for relaxation; sunny weather, or do we always expect wind and rain over a bank holiday weekend?

When we watch the news or listen to the radio on a bank holiday weekend there is often reference to the 'bank holiday traffic jams' with miles of queues trying to get into a seaside town or a place of outstanding natural beauty. I used to work in Preston and many of my friends and work colleagues would spend a long time queueing to get into Southport only to find parking spaces with a limited time, or no parking spaces at all.

When we're stuck in a traffic jam we are helpless; there's no direction to turn unless you want to attempt to go back from where you came. There are many emotions such as frustration and anger as our progress has been hindered by the people in the other vehicles who have been inconsiderate and have 'stolen' our idea of a 'day out'. There is maybe the wish that we should have stayed at home and not ventured out to spend hours of wasted time stuck in a tin can on wheels.

This may seem a strange comparison, but under two thousand years ago Jesus' disciples hit an unexpected 'traffic jam' on their life's journey with their leader and guide. From healing the sick; curing the blind; bringing the dead back to life and many other signs and miracles all of a sudden the disciples' journey came to that unexpected, unwelcome and unforeseen halt in more ways than one.

The disciples' leader and hero, Jesus Christ, was dead. Jesus didn't die a hero's death in battle he died one of the most barbaric deaths possible. Jesus was also sentenced to death as a criminal and anyone who was associated with Jesus could be considered as criminals too. The disciples had suffered an unexpected 'traffic jam' on life's journey that didn't just cause frustration and anger, but those emotions were overtaken by confusion with hearts and minds being broken and immeasurable fear as to their own fate. There was no turning back, nor was the way forward clear until John chapter 19, verse 20:

'On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you!"'

All of a sudden Jesus who they thought was dead was amongst them; a man who the disciples themselves had deserted and abandoned at the time of his arrest that man and at his death was now among them. For a brief moment the disciples' fear may not have been for the Jewish leaders, but the wrath of God himself, however, Jesus allays the disciples' fears with four words, "Peace be with you!" With these four words Jesus shows the love and forgiveness for his followers, the road was gradually becoming clearer. The disciples and followers of Jesus had literally hit a 'road block' on life's journey, but obstacles were being removed, barriers would be broken down, Jesus was alive! Seeing is believing! ...and so we come to Thomas, or 'Doubting Thomas' as he is more popularly known. Through the centuries Thomas has had 'bad press' and unfair criticism due to him doubting his fellow disciples' account that they'd seen Jesus alive. Thomas had every reason to doubt the disciples' account, it was not an unreasonable thought process that how can a man die and two days later come back to life? How was that possible?

The previous week when Jesus had come among them the disciples thought that Jesus was a ghost (Luke chapter 24, verse 37):

'(The disciples) were startled and frightened thinking they saw a ghost'

This is not mentioned in our Bible reading today but relates to the same appearance of Jesus to the ten disciples in the upper room.

So in the Gospel of Luke the disciples doubted themselves that it was actually Jesus until Jesus showed them his wounds from the crucifixion.

Thomas was actually being reasonable and rational and let us not think of Thomas as a coward or a person who was unfaithful, check out John chapter 11 'The Death of Lazarus'. When Jesus told his disciples that he intended to go back to Judea to see his sick friend they reminded him of a previous visit:

"A short while ago the Jews tried to stone you (in Judea) yet you want to go back there?"

Thomas actually spoke up against the other disciples replying:

“Let us also go to Judea that we may die with him!”

The ‘him’ referred to Jesus.

Thomas showed both courage and his devotion to Jesus; it’s only human nature to have doubts, we all have doubts, were Thomas’ doubts about a dead man coming back to life unreasonable? If Thomas had been in the upper room and a different disciple was not present would we have had a ‘doubting John’ or a ‘doubting Matthew’?

On our short journey today we’ve looked at those unexpected ‘traffic jams’ in life, when things seem to be going well then all of a sudden everything stops! I guess we could also look at the unexpected ‘potholes’ that happen throughout our lives too, unexpected ‘bumps’ on life’s journey that are not welcome and often stressful. We can all get frustrated when life comes to a standstill and sometimes we may doubt if God really cares. God’s response to our thoughts and prayers and the revealing of His plan in our lives may not be instantaneous, it certainly wasn’t for Thomas who had to be patient and wait a week later than the other disciples to see Jesus.

One more thing to consider on life’s journey is the ‘dreaded’ diversion; that diversion that takes us in a different direction to what we’d planned, but life is like that! Some diversions are great, others not so, but despite life’s frustrations God’s love and guidance is constant and often unexpected. We all suffer from life’s traumas but Jesus comes among us and says, “Peace be with you,” a peace and love that can be shared with others.

The world still needs a risen saviour to smooth the way ahead removing the traffic jams, the road blocks and the diversions and we pray that God will be our guide as we continue our life’s journey throughout this Easter period and beyond. **Amen**

BLESSING

Jesus goes ahead of us in the world and calls us to follow in his footsteps.

So let us go, and love as he loved;

forgive as he forgave;

serve others as he served others and be his disciples in the world today.

Amen

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