

Christ Church Lewes
(United Reformed and Methodist)

Resurrection
The Heart of Christian Faith

The Easter Season
21 April to 9 June 2019

David Smith
Worship and Mission Committee

This booklet, like others in the series, has been prepared, with the support of the Mission Committee, to encourage the congregation to take time to think about what the readings that have been heard in church say during the Easter Season. Visitors to the church and those attending week-night events are also invited to take a copy.

Introduction

Easter Day is the climax of the Church's year and the beginning of 50 days of celebration, during which the music is especially joyful and the buildings are made beautiful with spring flowers. Christians throughout the world reflect on the fact that the crucifixion of the itinerant teacher Jesus by the religious and imperial authorities led to the recognition by his followers that he was the anointed leader or *Christ*. In Easter services people greet each other with the words "Christ is risen" and reply "He is risen indeed". Belief in the *Resurrection* unites all Christians. [A number of technical terms that are used in Biblical studies and discussion of Christian worship are printed in italics and briefly explained.]

The nature of belief

The word *belief* signifies something that cannot be fully specified in words, even when it is related to a historical event. This is illustrated by a comparison between the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The Crucifixion was seen by all on a hill outside the city walls. It was documented by historians and imperial authorities. In contrast, the Resurrection was perceived only by Jesus' followers, who, in spite of his humiliation and suffering and however dimly, began to see the Christ in him. There are thus as many accounts of the Resurrection as there are people. No one has the whole story. Each has some personal part of it. We seek to understand it as fully as we can, but each year, as our experience develops, we find something that we have previously missed.

Easter in Christian Worship

Easter has been celebrated in the Church from the earliest times. Its worship, like the Jewish form of worship from which it was derived, includes the reading aloud of passages from *Scripture*. This is a collection of documents judged to define (but not limit) key teaching, known as *doctrine*. [These documents were written in the first century in scrolls; soon after, pages were bound together to make books or *codices*. The *canon*, or content, of the *Old Testament* comprises stories, laws and songs from the pre-Christian era. It was formalised after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, to make sure that the foundation of Jewish teaching was preserved. The canon of the *New Testament* was finally established, after much discussion, about 360 AD. It contains letters (*epistles*) and written accounts of the life and impact of Jesus known as *gospels*, which proclaimed the 'good news' that the Church found in him. By this time a huge variety of documents were in circulation and it was realised that a more

limited list of writings was necessary to combat views that were judged to be alien to the original teaching of Jesus, and to draw together the disparate groups, of Gentiles as well as Jews, who had by now joined the Church.

By about the fourth century AD, particular readings had become associated with particular seasons and the leaders of the Church circulated schedules that became known as *lectionaries*. More recently these have been harmonised by the main denominations in a three-year cycle so that, with only minor variations, the same readings are used throughout the world on a particular Sunday.

The readings for Easter 2019 are from Year C (Years A and B present slightly different perspectives). They include

1. A passage from the **Acts of the Apostles**, which, with the Gospel according to Luke, constitutes a monumental two-volume account of the life and significance of Jesus Christ.
2. A passage from the songs, known as **psalms**, used in Jewish worship,
3. A passage from one of the New Testament letters or from the **Book of Revelation**, also known as the **Apocalypse**, a circular letter probably written early in the second century AD, to encourage Christians to hold fast to their faith during persecution, and to strengthen them in times of doubt. There is even a suggestion that the obscure allegorical passages were intended to confuse hostile authorities. Much of the book is strange and unintelligible to outsiders now, but there are several magnificent hymns that boldly state the supremacy of God.
4. **The Gospel according to John** We do not know for sure who John was; he is often identified with John the Apostle and disciple of Jesus, but John was a common name. Written about 100 AD, the fourth gospel reflects developments in the 70 or so years after the Crucifixion. The church has grown. The people in it are not all Jews. Many are from other parts of the former Greek empire that had lasted for 300 years before the Roman conquest. In presenting Jesus to this vastly expanded community, John sees him as the embodiment of the qualities that the Jews had found in their holy, just and ever merciful God. The Jews had long talked about people made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) but it was all too evident that this image was tarnished. Jesus was perceived as a true unblemished image, in spite of, and later because of, the way he died. John described the relation between God and Jesus as that between Father and Son, who share the same 'nature' or 'being'. And because the life of the Risen Christ is shown in those who believe in him, i.e. commit themselves to represent him, his nature is shared also with them.

The four readings for each Sunday are intended to be read together. They are accompanied by prayers, called **Collects**, that summarise the theme of each week. Some of those printed in the Methodist Worship Book have been in use for many centuries; others have been revised, many of them about 1980.

The New Testament Scriptures have been studied in great detail for 2000 years and knowledge has been brought up to date as lost or forgotten ancient manuscripts have been discovered. We do not know the identities of all the writers but style, vocabulary, quotations, and references to contemporary events give a lot of information about the dates of the Greek texts and about where they were written. [Much the same could be said about the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, though this presents more difficulties, which need not concern us here.] We therefore can be reasonably sure about what the New Testament documents *say*.

What the documents *mean* is more complicated. Few were written at the time of the events they describe; some were written 70 or so years later, and so were dependent on information passed on orally over several generations. Many passages, especially those covered in this booklet, make it clear that Jesus was fully human. He was born, lived, died and was buried, like anyone else. However, the authors all came to believe that Jesus was, at the same time, alive. He still had unique capacities to heal and reassure, to forgive, to make new (create), to lift humanity to a level that could not be fully described in words. That means that there is a built-in ambiguity about describing Jesus, particularly in the post-resurrection appearances detailed in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. The writers are often so conscious of the presence of Jesus that they describe him as someone who can be seen and touched. At other times, even in the same passage, the writers seem to find Jesus in the community of their fellow disciples: their shared resources, their care for each other, their support for widows, their power to heal and encourage, their willingness to risk imprisonment for preaching, and their capacity to win over others to his cause.

These features of the Resurrection story will be explored as we reread the scriptures that we have heard in Church. Some aspects will pass us by. We'll notice others for the first time. We'll return to them after 60 days in the section called **For further reflection**.

21 April 2019 Easter Day

The Collect

Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with you in glory;
to whom with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit
be praise and honour, glory and might,
now and in all eternity, Amen.

Acts 10:34-43

The first words from the lectionary readings that we hear on Easter Day are presented as a speech by Peter to the household of a Roman soldier, Cornelius, in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast.

Luke sets out a clear and concise manifesto of the new religion as he perceived it in Antioch around 85 AD. By then Peter had died in 64 or 65 AD and Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 AD. The long sentence of the manifesto can be broken up as follows:

1. God is God of all nations, supreme in the whole world (v 35). Luke uses the word 'fear' (God) to mean 'actively respect' him, i.e. 'to do what is right.'
2. God's message of hope and peace was revealed in Jesus, who had been acknowledged as *Messiah*, given here as the Greek word *Christ* (v 36). The phrase 'Lord of all' is a kind of definition of Christ.
3. Jesus was a representative of the Jewish tradition, baptised by John the Baptist, who brought teaching and healing to the people (vv 37-38), just as the Jews believed God himself did (v 38). 'God was with him' is a way of saying that God approved his actions i.e. that he was keeping the Law and following God's will.
4. Peter and his fellow disciples were witnesses to all that Jesus stood for (v 39).
5. Jesus' authority was not recognised by the Jews. The Roman governor crucified him.
6. But this was not the end; his death brought him to life in his followers. His true nature was made manifest (v 40) not to everyone, but to those who put their faith in him, and who recognised his presence within their believing community (v 41).

7. His life, death, and continuing presence, served as a framework within which all are judged (v 42).
8. The tradition of the Jewish prophets, extended to include all races, is fulfilled in him. No one who turns to him is rejected. All have the potential to be made new (v 43) 'in his *name*,' i.e. in accord with his true nature. The forgiveness offered in his name is the same as that offered by Jesus, and the same as that from God himself.

Most scholars suggest that this passage should not be read as a verbatim account of what Peter said. It was much more important, and more carefully constructed, than that. It was common in Luke's time (indeed, it is common for playwrights of all generations) to mingle accounts of events, which appear to be history, with set speeches indicating what a particular person may have said on a particular occasion.

The Church was expanding to include all sections of the cosmopolitan population of the Eastern Mediterranean, Gentiles as well as Jews. Its self-understanding had been deepened as the boundaries of its mission had expanded. This is reflected in the up-beat and confident sermon Luke presents, rather than the tentative moves towards acceptance of non-Jews that were evident from the rest of the narrative describing Peter's encounter with Cornelius.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

This psalm was sung regularly at the end of the Passover Feast, which celebrates the rescue of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is likely to have been sung by Jesus and his disciples, as they went to the Mount of Olives before his arrest.

The refrain 'His [the Lord's] steadfast love endures for ever' appears at the beginning, at the end and in several other places. This is a mark of *liturgical* use (i.e. in a context of communal worship). The verses included in the readings seem to describe a mixture of individual (vv 14, 17-18) and social (vv 15-16) escapes from life-threatening trials. In each case the threat has been overcome and new possibilities, depicted as gates (vv 18-19) have been opened up, giving cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing.

The psalm provides two of the striking images used by the early Church to express the Resurrection experience. The stone [Jesus] the builders [Jews] rejected becomes the *chief corner-stone* that marks the foundation and determines the orientation of the new building [the Church]. The transformation is the Lord's doing (v 23) i.e. the Resurrection shows the

supreme power of God. The Church celebrates the Resurrection each Sunday, '*the day that the Lord has made,*' as the birth of a new day, when darkness is banished, life prevails over death, and building anew (the supreme attribute of God) continues. Luke uses the metaphor of the corner-stone in the speech of Peter before the elders and scribes (Acts 4:11), suggesting that the psalm had, by the time he was writing, become part of the way the Church defined itself.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

The letters of Paul, who was executed in Rome about 64 AD, preceded the gospels, so they give us some of the earliest views of the impact of the life and death of Jesus. The first letter to the Corinthians was probably written between 52 and 57AD, i.e. only 20 or so years after the Crucifixion. The Corinthian Church had already been established but unsurprisingly people were finding it difficult to understand what was meant by 'resurrection'. Paul tries (with some difficulty) to explain. He deflects attention away from 'what happened to Jesus' and, in a passage the significance of which cannot be fully captured in words, presents the Resurrection as symbolising the transformation of humankind. As frequently in the New Testament, this can be understood with reference to an individual life, or as an *apocalyptic* statement, with reference to the whole of time (v 24). The word *Adam* (v 22), which means Man, represents humankind *as we are*, i.e. with our relationship with God fractured and infected through our human nature. The new Adam, Christ, in whom 'all shall be made alive,' represents humankind *as we are meant to be*, united with God in purpose and intention. It is common in religious writings to personify abstract conditions, as Paul does here. Those influences that prevent us from being united with God are described as enemies and Death, the complete and final breaking of the bonds between God and Man, is the last enemy. The passage ends with the claim that, in the Resurrection, even this last enemy is vanquished. The consequences of the *Fall* (Genesis 2-3) are reversed.

John 20:1-18

It is striking that the New Testament accounts of the first days after the Crucifixion become more detailed the later they were written. Paul's letter (see above) gives almost no information about what happened. The gospel according to Mark, written slightly later, says very little. Luke, writing about 85 AD describes incidents in which Jesus 'appears' to his disciples. The fullest account is in the fourth gospel, written about 100 AD, this is the most mature reflection on the Resurrection that we have in Scripture. If visual details were dominant in the narratives we should expect to find more in the earlier accounts when memories were fresh. Theologians have therefore suggested that the purpose of the details was to enhance what the later writers wished

to say about the significance of the Resurrection, rather than to add local colour.

We can read this passage in several ways: as a simple narrative; as an Ancient World story whose meaning is implicit, rather than spelt out; or as frameworks for reflection on the Resurrection that is at the heart of our Christian faith. Reading them in one way does not invalidate reading them differently on another occasion.

Mary Magdalene, Peter and John come to the tomb and find it empty. They come under the shadow of the Crucifixion, 'while it was still dark' (v 1). They are confused, sense something unprecedented, but do not know what has happened or what to do. What is clear is that the body of Jesus was not to be found where they expected, in the tomb among the dead. That was the first sign of something new, something they had overlooked (v 9). There was a glimmering of *belief* (v 8 See Introduction). and a sense that something new was to unfold them both individually (Mary, John and Peter in turn) and together. Here are some points for reflection.

1. The empty tomb with its folded linen suggests that the body has not been stolen (v 2). Jesus' earthly life had come to an orderly end, not a confused one. His mission was accomplished.
2. It is worth asking whether the description of the empty tomb, presented by the gospel-writer John, points to the *transcendence* of the risen Christ, as an image of the *unseen* God of Jewish tradition. He was there at the beginning (John 1:1) and still there when all earthly things are removed and neatly folded. Perceiving God as beyond sight is not an alternative to perceiving God through the Church. Both perspectives are necessary; each serves to keep the other in balance. This point is considered further in the commentary on Mary below and in the final section of the booklet.
3. The tradition, which seems to have been established from the earliest times, that Mary was the first to peer into the tomb has been cited in recent years to bolster claims for gender equality in the Church.
4. It is sometimes suggested in Easter sermons that the glances into the empty tomb express flashes of insight in which the significance of the Resurrection instantly becomes clear. If, however, the Easter lectionary readings are read as a whole, the steps in understanding appear to be much more tentative, with the truth emerging gradually over many years.

The allusions that underpin the narrative of the empty tomb are also apparent in the intensely personal encounter with Mary. She remains behind when the others have gone home. Her distress is relieved only when she hears her name. Jesus *is* alive but the words “Do not touch me” make it clear that his new life is different from the old. Jesus says he has not gone back to what he was, but he is still with his disciples for ever. “Go and tell the others”, he says (v 17). She would find him with, in, and through his close followers. The new relationship would be based on the indissoluble unity between the risen Christ and his Father in Heaven. Through the ministry and passion of Jesus this is a relationship that draws in all his disciples (vv 17-18).

John’s method of enriching his Easter narrative is similar to that used by painters to capture the significance of scriptural incidents. In the painting by Titian (ca. 1490-1576) called *Noli me tangere* (Do not touch me) in the National Gallery in London, Mary reaches out to Jesus without making physical contact, yet the two bodies are painted as one dynamic ensemble. The surrounding landscape and the beauty of the sky show the Resurrection encounter as the dawn of a new day.

The Collect, revised in 1978, is based on one that has been used on Easter Day since the seventh century. The old is made new, the rejected stone is made the cornerstone. Jesus is not among the grave clothes but with his disciples. Through the renewal of our baptismal vows, we are enabled to put the ‘old order’ aside, become ‘alive in Jesus Christ’ and one with God.

28 April 2016 The Second Sunday of Easter

The Collect

Faithful God,
the strength of all who believe
and the hope of those who doubt;
may we, who have not seen, have faith
and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever, Amen.

Acts 5: 27-32

Luke presents another speech by Peter. The narrative that provides its context runs parallel to the account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The high priests and Sadducees thought that the apostles had been securely locked up (vv 17-18) but after escaping from prison they appeared in the Temple 'at day break' (v 21). The officers could not find them (v 24). Their teaching, openly in the Temple, had not been suppressed as the authorities intended.

Peter's defence to the council is a concise statement of the Church's belief. Jesus was *Messiah*, or anointed leader, in the Jewish tradition, but was crucified. He was, however, not dead (v 30). Now He was exalted (raised) as Saviour (v 31), and seated at God's right hand, the place for God's agent. He brought repentance and forgiveness to allow people to make a new start (v 31). He is present in his followers who are his witnesses (v 32). A formal, well organised statement like this seems to come from the time Luke was writing rather than the time Peter was speaking.

Psalm 118:14-29

The psalm is the same as that for Easter Day but with some extra verses that develop the metaphor of a festal procession (v 27) through a gate to a new life of righteousness and to the four corners (horns) of the altar, i.e. to a full commitment to the law of God (v 19-20). The words of v 26 were associated by the Church with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem the week before his death, when he was about to fulfil the perfect will of his Father. They form part of the 'unending hymn of praise', known as the *Sanctus*, and, in most branches of the Church, are included in every Communion Service.

Revelation 1:4-8

The Book of Revelation comprises passages about first century church history, stories of strange dreams and bizarre animals that were common in allegorical

writing about the time of Jesus' birth (compare the Book of Daniel, which we know, from references to contemporary history, was put together about 164 BC).

This passage shows that Revelation was intended as a circular letter (v 4). Jesus is portrayed as ruler of kings on earth (v 5) by virtue of his faithful witness. As 'first-born of the dead' he makes way for others to be renewed and reconciled to God (compare the reading from 1 Corinthians last week). This is expanded in vv 5-6, which constitute a formal hymn. The church is described as *priesthood*, i.e. as a body of people whose performance of sacred rituals mediates between God and humanity. The first century belief that the second coming of Jesus as Christ was imminent is reflected in v 7. The words of v 8 are still used at times of bereavement. God is Alpha and Omega, first and last, from beginning to end, beyond all time.

John 20:19-31

From our perspective 2000 years later, it is tempting to suggest that the Resurrection was neat, tidy and apparent to everyone, and that people immediately realised its implications. The readings from John's gospel, today and last week, make it clear that this was not the case. John tells us that the disciples gathered together for mutual support and encouragement (v 19) on 'the first day of the week' (the day of the new creation, an echo of Genesis 1). The fear of the Jews receded and they heard the greeting 'Peace be with you' (vv 19, 21). They became conscious of the presence of Jesus their Lord in a new way, giving them peace, and hope, courage, and confidence to be his ambassadors, i.e. to speak and act on his behalf when he was not physically there (v 21). This is the context in which the words 'Peace be with you' are said in every Communion Service. Peace is not something we give from ourselves, but an expression of the unity between God and the risen Christ, a gift that is offered to us so we can share it with others.

The disciples' role as mediator was even extended to the forgiveness of sins (v 23), something that in Jewish and Christian theology can be accomplished by God alone. The words of Jesus made this clear when he 'breathed on them' and invited them to 'receive the Holy Spirit', i.e. to be the means of expressing in this world the will of God himself. The word translated 'breathed' is the same as that in the Septuagint (Greek) version of Genesis 2:7: 'God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being'. John's version of Pentecost is less spectacular than Luke's (See below) but it links the Holy Spirit more explicitly with Jesus.

Thomas, like others, found it difficult to accept that someone who had been humiliated and executed among criminals could be Messiah. He wanted to be sure that the person whom the disciples perceived to be with them was the same Jesus that he had known previously. He wanted to see and touch the wounds for himself and refused to accept the second-hand view of others (v 25). A huge leap in comprehension was required, from seeing with his eyes to understanding with his heart; or, put differently, from understanding that, even when Jesus could not be physically seen, he could be truly present. Jesus' support, encouragement, and power to make new, were real, even though they were now reflected through other people. As in other episodes of his gospel, e.g. those describing the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 26), the paralysed man at the pool (John 5:19-29), and the blind man (John 9:37), John dramatically compresses the development of thought over the first century into a single conversation. In vv 28-29 we see Thomas develop from logical *reason* (based on physical sight) to *belief* (that holds even when reason fails). Thomas' final affirmation, 'My Lord and my God!' expresses profound insight that far surpasses that of the other disciples.

John presents this passage as an eye-witness account of the first week or two after the Crucifixion. However there are features that seem to be about the experience of the Church of 100 AD: the gathering of the faithful, the greeting 'Peace be with you,' the emerging link between Father, Son and Spirit, the commissioning of disciples as emissaries. These suggest that John is writing about belief in his own day.

The words of **the Collect**, from the Anglican Church of Canada (1985), explicitly associate us with Thomas. The faithfulness of God brings encouragement to all who are perplexed, and hope to those who persevere when they cannot see clearly. The prayer recognises that all have imperfect understanding and need support to continue in faith year by year, in order to follow Christ and to know him more fully.

5 May 2019 The Third Sunday of Easter

The Collect

God of life and love,
your Son made himself known to his disciples
in the breaking of bread.
Open our eyes that we may see him
in his redeeming work;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The readings today refer to two flawed people who made dramatic changes in their understanding through encounters with the risen Christ. Peter and Paul are celebrated together on 29 June each year.

Acts 9:1-6 (See also vv 7-20)

This passage describes one of the best known and perhaps least understood of the 'Resurrection appearances.' Luke includes it in Acts three times (see also Acts 22:6 and 26:12) although Paul (Saul's Roman name, which he used when he travelled from Jerusalem to the wider Roman empire) does not mention it in his own writings. We do not know precisely what happened on the road to Damascus; the three accounts differ, suggesting that the details were recalled differently, and expanded differently, in different contexts.

In the years immediately after the Crucifixion, Jesus' followers met in the established (Jewish) synagogues so there was inevitably inner conflict for those with devout Jewish upbringing, who could not envisage how an Anointed Leader (Messiah), endorsed by God, could be defiled by crucifixion. Those who did make the massive change of perspective to recognise Jesus as Messiah were described as followers '*in the Way*' (v 2). Saul was one of those profoundly conflicted. He had watched the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:51-8:1), a friend from the same synagogue and district of Asia Minor, whose fearless integrity was like that of Jesus himself. Saul was clearly struggling to reconcile his upbringing with what he saw in Stephen. He attacked the followers of Jesus because he thought they were mistaken; Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah.

Then, as he walked to Damascus and thought about why he persecuted the followers of Jesus, he saw that he was persecuting the person for whom Stephen had died: Jesus himself (vv 4-5). This came as a blinding 'light from heaven'. Luke's narrative suggests that Saul immediately adopted his new

persona but he himself tells us (Galatians 1:18, 2:1) that it was 3 years before he went to see Peter in Jerusalem and another 14 years before he came to play a leading part in the growth of the church. Perhaps Luke and Paul are both right; sudden insight is commonly followed by years of growth in understanding and discipleship.

Psalm 30

Christians have long associated this psalm with the day before Easter. The psalmist describes how when he was sinking into darkness and depression and it seemed as though his foes were gloating, his cry for help was answered and he was lifted up. He realises that his self-confidence was not justified (vv 6-7), but shrewdly recognises that God has no interest in his banishment (vv 8-10). When he cries again for help his relationship with God is restored like daylight after night and his voice is raised in thankfulness and praise.

Revelation 5:11-14

This passage is familiar to both churchgoers and non-churchgoers as the final words of Handel's *Messiah*. 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...'. The metaphor of a heavenly chorus including all in the visible natural world, and all in any conceivable invisible world, has been used in Jewish worship for many centuries (compare Isaiah 6:1-3). It expresses the supreme sovereignty of one changeless God. Here, this metaphor is associated with another: that of the *Lamb* (v 12). With the exception of the important reference in John 1:36, 'Lamb' as a title is used in the New Testament only in Revelation. It has nevertheless become a major Christian symbol. In the Old Testament it signified unmerited suffering; here the Lamb is exalted above all others, for all time. The exaltation and reign of Jesus come through his suffering and self-giving. The significance of the Resurrection and that of the Cross cannot be separated.

John 21:1-19

The gospel according to John comes to a natural conclusion at the end of chapter 20. Its purpose is neatly summarised: that readers should believe that Jesus was the Messiah, one with the eternal God, and that this belief brought new life. However, the following chapter is written in the same style as the rest of the gospel and is accepted as a part of it. The emphasis shifts from the individual to the community.

This Resurrection story is presented as another dawn narrative in three episodes.

1. The disciples fish all night but catch nothing. As day was breaking (v 4), Jesus suggests they try again. He uses the word 'children', understood within the Church of John's day as referring to the status of adopted sons and daughters of God. As night turns to day, the disciples' community will revive and expand.
2. Jesus has prepared a meal. The disciples know him as takes bread and gives it to them (v 13). The Eucharist seems to have been adopted as a representation of the living Christ, from the earliest decades of the Church.
3. The power of the Resurrection is demonstrated in the rehabilitation of Peter. Before the arrest of Jesus he had been self-confident and boastful. When the arrest took place he was bitterly humiliated. Here, the trust that Jesus was willing to show in him brings him back from despair. His threefold affirmation of loyalty wipes out his previous threefold denial. His recommissioning shows a three-step increase in responsibility within the community of believers: "Feed my lambs" (v 15); "Tend my sheep" (v 16); "Feed my sheep" (v 17). The final words of Jesus, "Follow me", match those he used when he first called the disciples. Jesus was alive in and through them.

The key petition in **the Collect** this week is for insight: to see the Risen Christ in the breaking of bread, and through his 'redeeming work'. The readings exemplify this work as being freed from the chains of prejudice (like Paul) or self-confidence (like Peter) or despair (like the psalmist). As people are made new, Christ is exalted (Revelation hymn) and the whole company of earth and heaven says 'Amen'.

12 May 2019 The Fourth Sunday of Easter Good Shepherd Sunday

The Collect

God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
with the blood of the eternal covenant:
make us perfect in every good work to do your will,
and work in us that which is well-pleasing in your sight;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 9:36-43

The story of the raising of Tabitha, like that of the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel, makes little sense to 21st century Christians *if it is taken as a scientific account of what happened*. However, writing of history in Luke's day was intended, as here, to express experience and interpretation rather than to be scientifically precise. He uses the story to emphasise that the extraordinary power that the historic Jesus showed to heal and make new was now apparent in his disciples. The same Jesus, as the risen Christ, was alive in them.

Psalm 23

The psalmist presents two images of God, drawn, in part, from ancient ideas of kingship.

First (vv 1-4), *God is a shepherd*. He is a Protector, who leads his people to places where they can find sustenance (a reference, perhaps, to the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land). He provides support and encouragement when the way is difficult or treacherous, or passes through dark ravines where predators lurk.

Secondly (vv 5-6), *God presides at a banquet*. He is a generous host, who actively prepares to welcome his people, who offers safety and asylum from enemies, and who greets his guests as unique individuals. Their *cup* overflows. [The word cup is often used in scripture to refer to all that happens in life, whether happy, as here, or bitter, as e.g. in Matthew 26:39.]

The psalm is widely used in funerals but, *taken as a whole*, it is about life, about building an identity that is not erased by death. In the final verse, the psalmist says that God, who has guided, guarded and sustained him

throughout his life, in good times and in bad, will not change as he meets his own death. When he dies, he will find a place in God's house, where God's goodness and mercy will abide for ever - beyond the bounds of time and space.

These two images, the shepherd and the banquet, are remembered especially on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, as they say something important about the Church. In the gospel this week Jesus is described as working in his Father's name as a shepherd who knows and sustains his sheep. In Christ Church we see an image of the Good Shepherd, in the window behind the communion table, every time we come to worship. The figure can be taken as pointing to God (the Lord, as in the psalm and Jewish scripture more generally) or to Jesus (as in the gospel). In the image of the window the two are brought together.

Revelation 7:9-17

The writer of the Book of Revelation describes a number of dramatic visions, which reflect the thinking, and possibly the worship, of the Church at the beginning of the second century AD. The vision in this passage depicts 'a great multitude which no man could number from every nation, from all peoples and tongues' (v 9). The Church was no longer a Jewish sect. The people are dressed in white (v 14), symbolising their *holiness*, i.e. their separation from all that makes them unworthy in God's presence. They carry palm branches (v 9), symbolising victory in Jewish thinking and adopted by the Church, especially in religious art, to indicate *martyrs*, who have died for their faith. Their status is not achieved by their own efforts. 'Salvation belongs to *God*' through the self-giving of Jesus as Lamb (v 10). One of those standing by interprets. The people have been cleansed and made fit to live in the presence of God (v 15 cf. Psalm 23:3-6). The Lamb has become a Shepherd (v 17). The notion that self-giving is at the heart of the nature of God is what enabled the early Church to give encouragement and hope to those facing trial, suffering and death, and to see the triumph of the Resurrection in the suffering of the Cross.

John 10:22-30

Much of the Gospel according to John comprises extended *discourses* that explore the profound metaphors that he uses in writing about the nature of Jesus as Christ. In chapter 10, John writes about Jesus as *Shepherd*, one of the first images used in pastoral communities to characterise a presence stronger than themselves. The discourse on Shepherd is read in sections on the Fourth Sunday of Easter in successive years of the three-year cycle. In year C we have the concluding passage.

The Feast of the Dedication was kept at the winter solstice (v 22-23). It commemorates a new altar, after the old one was defiled by the Greeks, who ruled Palestine before the Romans. The question put to Jesus by the Jews (v 24), like many put by present day society, demanded a yes/no answer, but this could not be given without misleading. Before the Crucifixion the word *Christ* meant *Messiah*, the anointed (human) leader envisaged in Jewish tradition. Only later was its meaning expanded to that it had acquired when the gospels were written. Jesus suggested that the Jews should learn by association, by following him, as the sheep recognise the one who looks after them. He called God *Father* and, in John's final sentence here, declares "I and the Father are one" (v 30). John claims that in Jesus we perceive the eternal God; in a later passage he claims that disciples too are included in the words "are one". (See the reading for the Seventh Sunday below.) It was another 300 years before the central Christian doctrine of Trinity was clearly formulated, but the Scriptural origin is clear in passages such as this in John's gospel.

The readings are brought together in **the Collect**. The Risen Christ leads his disciples like a shepherd and nurtures and nourishes them, so that their lives become more like his. He is bound to them by a covenant, sealed by his steadfastness on the Cross, a covenant made by God himself. And, as the doxology affirms every week, he reigns in unity with the Father and the Spirit, one God for all time.

19 May 2019 The Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Collect

Eternal God,
whose Son Jesus Christ
is the way, the truth and the life:
grant us to walk in his way,
to rejoice in his truth,
and to share his risen life;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 11:1-18

The transformation of the *Messiah*, or anointed Jewish leader into *Christ* as Saviour of the whole of humanity, has been noted as an essential feature of the Resurrection experience (See commentaries of previous weeks). It required particularly difficult adjustments for people like Peter who had been brought up to observe the Jewish food laws as part of everyday life. Under the unifying policies of the Greek Empire after 330 BC, Jews had been martyred for refusing to eat food their Law specified as unclean, so strict observance was an essential part of their identity (v 8). To make sure his readers do not miss the point, Luke describes the vision and the sequel in the house of Cornelius twice: in Acts 10:9-16 and again here in chapter 11. If the Jewish laws had remained in place the Gentile converts to Christian beliefs would not have been able to share meals with Jewish Christians and the institution of a Eucharist/Communion Service would have been impossible. Numerous examples in this booklet show that, from the very beginning, the followers of Jesus had a deep commitment to remember him, as he asked them to on the night that he was betrayed. This rite provided visible embodiment of the continuing presence of the risen Christ; this was where his followers felt closest to him. So Peter had a difficult question to answer (v 3) and the clash with the Jewish leaders was a matter of real pain. Does Luke suggest that the heart-searching was within Peter himself, by the threefold repetition of the challenge (v 10)?

A similar development of understanding was evident in the word *baptism*. Luke (v 16) repeats the words he wrote earlier (Luke 3:16): “John baptised with water but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit”. The old baptism with water signified turning away from the past and making ready for a new start. The new baptism with the Holy Spirit implied more radical transformation. Believers in the risen Christ received empowerment and new strength to live

differently, so that they expressed something of the presence of God himself. The narrative here implies that here this transformation was rapid and openly visible (Compare the commentary on Pentecost). Over time Baptism became the defining rite of entry into the Church to be followed by what has been called 'growth in holiness' within the Church.

Psalm 148

It has long been customary to link the Resurrection with the Creation story, which is here presented as a song of universal praise. The psalm is a model for the hymn of St Francis (*Rejoice and Sing* 39). The sequence is similar to that in Genesis 1: the heavens, stars, sun and moon, the land and the seas and rain, wind, snow and frost, creatures in the seas, mountains, hills, fruit trees and cedars, insects and birds, and finally kings and peoples. In vv 1-6 God is praised from above, and in vv 7-12 from below. In v 13 his glory is declared to be 'above earth and heaven.' The *entire* natural world is joined in one. This notion underpins the idea (Act 11:9) that God is Father to the *entire* human race.

Revelation 21:1-6

Allusions to Old Testament themes underlie the portrayal of a new creation. Although they are not explicitly developed in this passage they show the central place of the Jewish tradition in the thinking of the Church in about 100 AD.

1. The words 'a new heaven and a new earth' come from Isaiah 66:22, where they are associated with the return of the Jewish people from their Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.
2. Marriage in the Old Testament was a metaphor for faithfulness of the people to the precepts of God (e.g. Isaiah 61:10), and adultery a metaphor for straying from the right path. So the New Jerusalem appears as a bride (v 2).
3. The words of v 3 "The dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them" reflect the words of the Covenant made between God and his people, with Abraham and Moses and renewed after the exile (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 37:27)

For the first century Church, however, these images had become more powerful and their significance deepened and extended. The words of v 3 had been given new meaning in the life and death of Jesus, who was seen as the image of the unseen God. The Covenant of the patriarchs and prophets had been made new in the obedient and self-giving life of Jesus. The words of v 4 are from Isaiah 25:8, 35:10 and those of v 6 are from Isaiah 55:1. God's presence will protect against despair and his life-giving water (v 6) is limitless.

Words that provided encouragement to the exiled Hebrews strengthened the first century Christians facing persecution and martyrdom. They are still used in funeral services. The enduring love of God is not extinguished even by death.

John 13:31-35

Chapters 13-17 of the gospel according to John are presented as a *Farewell Discourse* between Jesus and his disciples on the night he was arrested. Although this is presented as a verbatim record of what Jesus said, it is better considered as a summary, written 70 years after the Crucifixion, of the purpose and meaning of Jesus' life, his relationship with the changeless God whom he called 'Father', and his relationship with the band of frail followers he left behind. Because of the importance and profundity of this discourse the lectionary compilers have ensured that sections are distributed throughout the three-year cycle of readings for the Easter season.

When the Jewish disciples grew into the Church they maintained the moral obligations of the Law and required Gentile converts to follow them. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18) still stood as an enormously demanding standard. So what was new about Jesus' commandment (v 34)? When Judas had left, Jesus put it into the context of his Passion, in which God would be glorified. This is John's way of expressing the closeness of relations between Jesus and his Father (v 31). His disciples would find his death painful. They could not follow him but they could pass on to each other the deep love that he would show through his Passion. This mutual love would be the mark of their discipleship. Inasmuch as they remained true in this love they would share his humanity and become his brothers and sisters. By implication (v 32) they would become adopted sons and daughters of his Father.

The Collect links the readings with the new insights that the risen Christ brings to our common humanity. Through him, his disciples find a new direction for their lives. They see others, even those of different races and cultures, with new truth. United with him they come to represent him. Others see the risen Lord in them.

26 May 2019 The Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Collect

God of mercy,
as we rejoice in the resurrection of your Son,
the Bread of Life,
feed us with your plenty
and increase in us compassion for the hungry;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 16:9-15

This passage reminds us of how the good news expressed in the risen Christ spread in the decades after the Crucifixion. The Jews were consummate traders, who had set up a series of synagogues throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. They provided a network for Paul's preaching throughout Asia Minor and also when he recognised that the time had come to cross into what we know as Europe. In Philippi, in modern Greece, he went to a Sabbath meeting and preached. Lydia, who seemed to be attached to the Jewish group but probably not herself Jewish, was converted by Paul's preaching. She was well-to-do and able to offer hospitality. In baptising her Paul broke two cultural taboos. He accepted a non-Jew as a follower of Christ and accepted a woman on the same terms as a man. The change in pronoun to 'we' suggests that Luke, the writer of the narrative, had joined Paul for this part of the journey.

Psalm 67

The opening verse of the psalm reflects the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, which is still used at baptisms and weddings. All nations are invited to join in praise, recognising the 'saving power' of God, who is able to bring new life from the old (v 2), who guides the nations to a better future (vv 2, 4), who judges always with fairness (v 4), and whose good will is without bounds (v 6). In v 7 "Let all the ends of the earth fear him" is a warning that God must be taken seriously. Clearly, in view of the rest of the psalm, he is not a God of wrath, but those who do not attend to his teaching risk being cut off from his goodness and mercy. That is the ultimate disaster, recognised every day when we pray to be delivered from evil.

Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5

The writer continues his vision of the Holy City, a New Jerusalem (Church) after a time of persecution. The impact of the imagery depends on knowledge of the book of Ezekiel (e.g. Ezekiel 40:2; 47:1-10) and its message of hope for a return

from exile in Babylon. The continuity in thought between the Old and New Testaments is shown by the references to the twelve tribes of Israel (v 12) and the twelve apostles (v 14). In the new city there is no need for a Temple (v 22), for God's presence is everywhere. There is no sun or moon because God's light is everywhere. The water of life, flowing from the throne of God (22:1), invokes the vision of Ezekiel 47, and the tree of life (22:2) the Garden of Eden. The paradise that was lost there is regained; the leaves of the tree of life are "for the healing of the nations". By the time Revelation was written the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 AD.

John 14:23-29

This passage explores what the Church came to understand by the Covenantal statement: "My [God's] dwelling place shall be with them" (Ezekiel 37:27). The disciples are told that God (whom Jesus calls *Father*) comes to those who love him, i.e. those who truly obey his commandments and seek to do his will. This is made clearer by the life and teaching of Jesus, who is himself the Way. Through him we have a truly authentic understanding of the Father and discern his will (v 24), and know his presence. Jesus says: "We [Father and Son] will come and make our home with [those who love] him" (v 23). When Jesus is physically taken away, his words will be kept alive (v 24). The disciples will still know his presence through his teaching and be strengthened by his remembrance. John calls this ongoing, indwelling presence the "Counsellor, the Holy Spirit" (v 26). Those who love God, and seek to do his will, know peace that cannot be found in any other way (v 27). The words of the gospel have helped future generations to understand something of the formal doctrine of *Trinity* which was founded on passages of scripture such as this (See commentary on later Sundays).

The modern **Collect** reflects the readings in two ways. The presence of the risen Christ in the Church provides continual nourishment, support and encouragement. The presence of Christ in his followers is shown by their increased awareness of the needs of others.

30 May 2019 Ascension Day

The Collect

Eternal and gracious God,
grant that as we believe your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ,
to have ascended with triumph
into your kingdom in heaven,
so we may also in heart and mind ascend to where he is
and with him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

Acts 1:1-11

After linking his Gospel with Acts, Luke recounts the disciples' difficulty in finding words to articulate two conflicting propositions: that Jesus was no longer physically present, and that, as they came together to remember him, he appeared to be still with them. When they ask: "When will the kingdom be restored to Israel?" (v 6), the answer seems to be that *they* were the kingdom. *They* would be "witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the end of the earth" (v 8). The kingdom would be restored *in the Church*.

The gospels tell us that Jesus said a great deal about his kingdom. It was clearly not defined by political power. It was a 'kingdom of heaven'; his sovereignty was shown by the integrity of his people in following his way. It was not defined by physical or temporal boundaries; it was qualitatively different from earthly kingdoms. The 'kingdom of heaven' no longer encompassed only Israel; Jerusalem would be but the starting point for something that would embrace the whole world. Luke's accounts of Easter Day and Ascension Day show two complementary perspectives. In the first the angels say: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" He was not there in the tomb (Luke 24:5). In the second they say: "Why do you look into the sky?" (v 11). The physical Jesus could not be found there either. The disciples *did* find the risen Christ 'among the living', i.e. *in their midst*, as they set about building his kingdom. In the rest of v 11 Luke articulates the first century belief that Jesus would soon return in a kind of reverse ascension. This is shown in several of the Easter Season readings but the Second Coming is now considered to be a metaphor, rather than as a physical expectation.

Luke and his contemporaries had to find some way to describe the continuing presence of the risen Christ within the Church after Jesus was no longer

physically present. They came to speak of this as the *Holy Spirit*, a term that brings together the *immanent* (i.e. all pervasive) presence of God in his people and the *transcendent* Creator of Genesis 1:2. It is likely that Luke's link between the Holy Spirit and baptism (vv 4-5) shows the development of thinking over the 50 or so years between the Crucifixion and Luke-Acts. The link deepens the significance of this initiation rite so that it becomes a creative act in each individual, understood in the context of the whole Universe.

Psalm 47

In Jewish tradition this psalm was associated with the New Year; in Christian tradition it is sung on Ascension Day. It is clearly a hymn of triumph in which God in his greatness is victorious over all adversaries. He reigns over all the earth (v 7). The psalmist speaks of the God of Abraham; through Christian eyes the victor is Jesus Christ, who is pre-eminent above all others.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Until the 19th century the letter to the Ephesians was attributed to Paul. It is now realised that the literary style is different from the authentic Pauline letters and that Ephesians incorporates or assumes Paul's teaching. It was therefore probably written between 80 and 100 AD, after Paul's death, and about the time of Luke-Acts. As was common when scrolls were copied by hand, the attribution (Ephesians 1:1) was probably added by a transcriber to give the text greater authority. The lectionary reading appears to be one sentence!

Some of the affirmations that later crystallised in the Church's doctrine are here: one glorious almighty God, Father, Son and Spirit (v 17); Jesus 'sits at the right hand of the Father' [i.e. is the *agent* of the Father (v 20)]; his status and authority are exalted above all (v 21); he lives and reigns in the Church, which is his body (v 23), not only now but in all ages (v 21). Through Jesus Christ (v 17) and through the Church (vv 18, 22) we see the glory of God, which embraces the whole world. It has been suggested that the content may reflect an early Christian hymn.

Luke 24:44-53

The closing words of Luke's gospel introduce the missionary theme of Acts, the writer's second book. As in the stories of the journey to Emmaus and the encounter with the eunuch from Ethiopia, Luke tells us that the teaching of the Law, the prophets, and the psalms is brought to its true fulfilment in Jesus. From this tradition his followers, especially Christian Jews, would understand why the Messiah, the Christ, had to suffer and why his death would authenticate and vindicate him (vv 45-46). This insight was later accepted by

the whole Church and 250 years after Luke's gospel it was incorporated into the Creed, which we still proclaim: "On the third day he rose again *in accordance with the scriptures.*" The disciples would be witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection and in his name (v 47) would preach repentance and forgiveness to the whole world, beginning with Jerusalem. This vast commission (v 48) would be made possible because they would be empowered by the continuing presence in their lives of the Holy Spirit, i.e. of God himself (Acts 1:5).

The text for the **Collect** for Ascension Day is from the Book of Common Prayer. It emphasises the triumph of the risen Christ and prompts us to pray that we, his followers, may come in heart and mind to triumph too, setting aside all that divides us from him so that we are fit to be his brothers and sisters, and to live with him always.

2 June 2019 The Seventh Sunday of Easter

The Collect

Lord of Hosts,
purify our hearts
that the King of Glory may come in,
even your Son, Jesus our Redeemer;
for he is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

Acts 16:16-34

This passage follows the reading for the 6th Sunday. Luke's skilful narrative gifts bring us this dramatic story of escape from prison. The use of the first person "we" in v 16 suggests that the writer of Acts was a witness to a real event. It can thus be read as an historical account: Paul and Silas, having encountered opposition from vested interests, are beaten and imprisoned, then freed from jail in an earthquake. The jailer and his family, overcome with relief that the prisoners are still there, are baptised. Or we can ask: "Why did Luke include it?" and look for deeper meaning as in other Lucan narratives. Preaching the gospel will inevitably encounter opposition; the disciples of Jesus are called to take up their cross and follow him. The conversion of the jailer through the steadfastness of Paul and Silas in the face of their punishment, and their refusal to retaliate by escaping (v 28), demonstrates the power of following the example of Jesus. The radical change that comes through baptism is shown as the jail is transformed from a place of confinement to one of hospitality (v 34). The episode ends with a meal, an abiding symbol of the Church, from the earliest times to the present, and made formal in the Eucharist.

This is one of several occasions, e.g. the meetings with Cornelius (Acts 10) and Lydia (Acts 16), when Luke suggests that a large number of people were baptised after a powerful speech, almost spontaneously, apparently with little preparation. Later it became clear that some of the teaching of the new religion was being misunderstood and that it was necessary for converts to undergo a period of induction before the actual initiation rite, in order to preserve unity in the teaching of the Church.

Psalm 97

This is one of a series of psalms (47, 96-99) that praise God as King over the whole Universe, i.e. over the entire natural world and over all peoples. He is a God of justice (righteousness) (v 2), who shows fairness and generosity to his

people and saves them from destruction (v 8). Worship of alternative gods (i.e. having a different set of priorities) is empty (v 7). Those who would truly worship him are required to show righteousness towards others (v 11). It is thought that these psalms were prepared for Temple worship; they have been widely adopted for use by Christians at major festivals.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

The final words of Revelation suggest that the risen Christ will return soon to judge the world, a widespread notion in the first century. With their longer historical perspective the compilers of the lectionary have edited out verses that seem to be *inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament*. [Note the very strict limit specified by the words in italics.] We can take the coming of Christ to be fulfilled through the Holy Spirit, which we can also describe as through the presence of the risen Christ in the Church. Those who truly follow God's commandments, as displayed in Jesus Christ, have the "right to the tree of life". They are the proper representatives of humanity, unlike Adam. Through the risen Christ in them, Creation is brought to fulfilment. The final verses (vv 17, 20) express the eagerness of the Church's response.

John 17:20-26

Chapter 17 of the Gospel according to John is set out in the form of a prayer, as Jesus prepares to leave those he came to serve, and who have committed themselves to him. The prayer is distributed over the three years of the lectionary cycle and in Year C we have the closing passage. The wording however appears to relate to the future, from the perspective of the writer's own day, as well as to the night before the Crucifixion. Jesus says that his profound unity with the Father extends to the friends he is leaving behind (v 21). The words "that they may be one" are often taken to be about unity between denominations but they are about much more than that. Jesus has "made known [his Father's] name" (v 26), which means he has shown his Father's character and attitude, and what his Father stands for. The prayer goes to the heart of our Christian faith. As God became human he raised humanity to a new status and thereby showed his glory on earth (v 22-23). Through the Resurrection he remains not merely *with* his disciples, but *in* them (v 26). Those who believe in him are transformed from *followers* to *representatives* (apostles) (v 20).

The Collect comes from the Anglican Society of St Francis (1992). It describes the purging of the old Adam to make way for the Risen Christ as purification, so that the glory of Christ can be seen in the hearts of his disciples as they are redeemed i.e. made new.

9 June 2019 Pentecost Sunday

The Collect

God, who at this time
taught the hearts of your faithful people
by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit:
grant us by the same Spirit
to have a right judgment in all things
and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;
through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 2:1-21

The Feast of Pentecost (50 days after the Passover) has been part of Jewish tradition for many centuries. It was originally a harvest festival celebrating the crops from the first of the two harvests that can be obtained each year in parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Then it became a celebration of the Law, which the Jews associated with Moses and gave them their sense of identity as a chosen people. The precepts of the Law, and sincere attempts to keep them, were seen as the realisation of God's presence. By the time that Luke was writing Acts, God's presence was also expressed in the Church, made up of the followers of Jesus, the body of the risen Christ. It is not surprising, then, that Luke presents this new expression of the presence of God as part of the Pentecost celebration. He conveys the excitement of the occasion in a formal speech by Peter, who recalls the dramatic language of the prophet Joel. It is probable that most Jews spoke a common (pidgin) form of Greek, as well as Aramaic, but numerous dialects and languages would be heard from the people in the streets, as Jews came for the festival 'from every nation under heaven' (v 5).

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

In the first part of the psalm, the creation story is retold. The writer exclaims with wonder (v 24) at the *wisdom* that sustains the whole world. He sees the breath of God in all that provides life and sustenance (vv 27-30). 'Spirit' and 'breath' are the same word in Hebrew; without breath creatures die (v 29). The creative power of God consistently renews the face of the earth (v 30). Christians have found that the psalm expresses the joy of their new life in the Church (vv 31-32) and their continued hope and optimism (vv 33-34). The Church represents a spiritual (transcendent) creation that complements the creation of the physical world. The Spirit that has renewed the face of the

earth since the beginning has renewed each member of the Church. All are enabled and inspired as they join the psalmist in praise.

Romans 8:14-17

The letter to the Romans is considered to have been written a year or two before Paul's death in 64 AD, i.e. about 30 years after the Crucifixion. By then the Church had spread throughout the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, aided by peace and good roads. The reading shows how Paul's thinking about the impact of the risen Christ had moved on from focus on its Jewish origins to the implications for the many peoples in the empire as a whole. At the heart of this thinking was the emerging concept of the *Holy Spirit*.

The passage is similar to one in an earlier letter (Galatians 4:6) written after his vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (See commentary on the Third Sunday) and his long time of reflection in Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 2:1). Scholars, who have made very detailed studies of the nuances of the Greek texts, have found significant changes in emphasis between the two versions.

The account in Galatians refers to the Holy Spirit much as Luke does in Acts 2 (See above), i.e. as an energising power coming from outside. In contrast, the Romans version presents the Spirit as an expression of *Sonship*, which the death and resurrection of Jesus offers to those who believe in him and follow him. It became an early tradition in the Church that the Aramaic word for Father, *Abba*, which the earliest gospel (Mark 14:36) tells us Jesus used in Gethsemane, was sometimes used alongside the normal Greek word in liturgical contexts. The significance of this is that the Sonship of Jesus is expressed in his *obedience*, even to death. Paul suggests that it is when followers show the same obedience that they become sons and daughters. The Holy Spirit expresses this status. Men and women are no longer slaves, without responsibility or respect, but "are made children of God, heirs and fellow heirs with Christ" (vv 16, 17). This is an amazing claim! Pause and think about the implication.

The teaching set out here was developed over the next 300 or so years and provided some of the scriptural foundation for the credal statement: "I believe in the Holy Spirit ,..., who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*" (See **For further reflection** below).

John 14:8-17

John tells us that after the Last Supper several disciples asked questions. This is a device that allows the writer to draw out further teaching. Philip asks to see the Father. The answer sounds simple but it is immensely significant. *The Father is to be seen in Jesus*, i.e. in all that Jesus has been doing and saying (v 9). Those who believe in Jesus will attempt to do the things that *he* has been doing. Furthermore, those who make requests *in the name of Jesus*, i.e. in accord with the actions of Jesus during his earthly ministry, will find a response from the Father (v 14). In this way, the Father (God) will be 'glorified in the Son' (v 13). The disciples' obedience to Jesus is an expression of their love, and this, in turn, will lead (v 16-17) to their receiving "the Spirit of *Truth*". This abiding support will enable them to act in accord with Jesus' commands. Those who do not accept Jesus (as being one with the Father, v 11) do not receive this support.

It is notable that God is referred to as *Father* both in Philip's question and Jesus' reply. So we have *Father, Son* and then (v 17) *Spirit*. It is the Son who shows, through what he does, what the Father is like. Then, when the Son is no longer with his followers physically (the context of the whole Farewell Discourse), they will receive the Spirit as guide and support. Eventually, after pondering such scriptural passages, the leaders of the Church arrived at the concept of God as *Trinity*. (See **For further reflection** below)

The modern **Collect for Pentecost** draws all the readings together and focuses on the Holy Spirit as *light*, opening up new possibilities, giving right judgments, comfort (used in its original sense of strengthening resolve), and cause for rejoicing.

For further reflection

Over the last 50 days we have read about 30 passages from Scripture. The selection has evolved over the centuries and has been reappraised many times by unnamed people whom we have referred to as lectionary compilers. It is worth reviewing what we have read and making some general points.

1. Accounts of the Resurrection cover a wide range of experiences. If insight is to be more than superficial it is necessary to bring experiences of different people together.
2. Retrospective insight is inherently different from contemporaneous insight. When we look back to a particular time, we know what happened subsequently; when we live through present experiences the future is unknown. It is important to remember this when we read Scripture. The writers rarely describe contemporaneous experience. Most rely on sources of 20-70 years ago. All accounts are inevitably coloured by what has happened since the events described.
3. The process of sifting and discarding went on until the canon of Scripture was agreed in about 360 AD. It continued in the work of lectionary compilers. The way Scripture is viewed is also affected by changes in general knowledge. For example, increased understanding of the Laws of Nature meant that what the New Testament authors presented in a matter of fact manner, e.g. the bodily ascension of Jesus, came to be accepted as metaphor, though the significance was unchanged. Changes in the way Scripture is interpreted do not mean that anything goes, or that Scripture as a whole can be discarded because parts of it no longer ring true.
4. Over the years, the Church has responded to problems of interpretation by continually asking and wrestling with questions. It has imposed two tests for any new interpretation. Is the change consistent with the rest of the Church's belief? Is it found to be widely helpful?
5. In the previous commentary on the Advent and Christmas Season we showed that the readings underpinned the first half of the statement of belief formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. In a similar way the readings of the Easter Season underpin the second half of the Creed.

The Nicene Creed is printed on p 135 of the *Methodist Worship Book* and as 760 in *Rejoice and Sing*.

The Resurrection is at the heart of our Christian belief. Through it we affirm our commitment to one holy supreme God, who frees and heals humanity and

makes it possible for men and women to become his adopted sons and daughters, and call him “Father”.

The New Testament writers were too close to the events of Jesus’ earthly life to be able to write a detailed statement to describe in full the situation immediately after his death. The readings discussed in this booklet do, however, show the profound thinking that informed the development of the first Christians from their Jewish inheritance, through simple baptismal affirmations (See commentary on Seventh Sunday), through set speeches (See commentary on Easter Day) to the distillation of agreed essential teaching in Creeds that are set out in a form that can be memorised and pondered, week by week and year by year.

In the preparation of this booklet, I have been able to use the commentaries and theological books of my wife Marion. I thank her for encouragement and detailed discussion of the text and Neil Fisher for reproducing the booklets for distribution. DS

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