

Worship at Wimborne Methodist Church  
16 May 2021 10:30 am, Easter 7  
Led by Rob White

**Welcome/Call to Worship**

You who are passing through hard times: come!  
You who need strength to support those who are suffering: come!  
You who are full of happiness: come!  
You who are burdened and busy: come!  
Come; let us unite in worship  
of the one who offers us protection, comfort and joy.

**Hymn** – The head that once was crowned with thorns.

**Suggested YouTube link:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FTwgkv8BCU>

**Opening Prayers**

**A prayer of approach:**

Jesus, we come before you with open eyes so that we may see the glory of your resurrection,  
with open hearts so that we may know your presence with us,  
with open ears so that we may hear your word,  
with open minds so that we may learn your will,  
and with open hands so that we may do the work to which you call us. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Forgive us, gracious God,  
when we have turned away from your word  
and immersed ourselves in the distractions of the world.  
Forgive us, when we have sought to belong to the world  
and compromised your truth to fit in.  
Forgive us, when we have bickered among ourselves  
and not shown the world that we are one.  
Forgive us, when we have distanced ourselves  
from those you have called us to serve.  
Forgive us, O God; protect us and unite us.  
In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Gracious God,  
we thank you for the enduring prayer of Jesus for his disciples  
which reaches and reassures us today as we walk in their footsteps,  
reminding us that we are not alone  
but protected, empowered, forgiven,  
and surrounded by your grace every step of the way. **Amen.**

## **Collect for today, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

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.**

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy Name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. **Amen.**

## **Introduction (before first reading)**

I am dividing my thoughts today into a series of shorter comments after we hear each reading. There is something odd about each of our three lectionary readings, which I'm linking with things that can go wrong in everyday life. Our overall theme is post-resurrection testimony about Jesus, as we would expect in this period after Easter. And my three slightly tongue-in-cheek headings for each section are these:

- Seemed like a good idea at the time.
- "Computer says no"!
- Great message, wrong place and time.

Don't worry, all will eventually be explained! So, we start with a passage from Acts.

## **Reading 1 - Acts 1:15-17, 21-26**

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) 16 and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus -- 17 he was one of our number and shared in this ministry."

21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when

Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

23 So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen 25 to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." 26 Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. (NIV)

## **Talk Part 1**

"Seemed like a good idea at the time".

If you are anything like me, you will have been somewhat frustrated in life by ideas that seemed good but somehow never come to fruition. This often happened to me when I was in full time local government work. I and my team always tried out 'good' ideas, but some never worked in practice, for one reason or another. Life is like that. We must be prepared for disappointments and failures as well as success. "Seemed like a good idea at the time", is a feeling that I know will be familiar to everyone.

I thought of that when I came to this passage. A good idea, on the face of it, to replace the errant disciple Judas. It could have been thought significant that 12 in some way stood for the original 12 tribes of Israel. This "whole nation" inclusiveness must be symbolically maintained, so they thought, as the word of Jesus spread through the whole Jewish nation. Maintained until all were saved, all worshipping in the new way.

Their manner of choosing the new twelfth disciple seems a little odd to us. "Casting lots" is like throwing dice, theoretically random. But it was common in the religious practices of the time. They expected that God himself would intervene and make the result come out right.

Did the result come out right? The fact is, we just don't know. We hear nothing more of Matthias, the selected new disciple. Indeed we hear very little of the disciples as a group, or most of the individuals within it, after this event. Maybe Matthias went on to do great things in Jesus' name, but no firm evidence, it's only myth and legend from here on in.

Why did this happen? It seems all too clear in hindsight. The embryonic church at the crossroads did not take the obvious path, making inroads into mainstream Judaism. Instead, with time and under persecution, the mission to the Gentiles developed strongly, with the Jewish focus gradually fading away. The importance of the disciples during Jesus' physical life was indisputable, but the future church would have different mission fields. It seems the intended direction of the Holy Spirit was not at all clear to the disciples at first. They probably wouldn't have liked it at all if they had realised what was coming. We can read in Acts just how hard it was for Peter, a Jew, to accept this new direction. He had to be prepared for it through a vision.

So, keeping to 12 disciples, although it looked like the right thing to do at the time, did not seem to have much impact on what was to follow. At least, so far as our Bibles and history records.

The important lesson to take away from this is that THEY TRIED. They knew they couldn't carry on as they were. They knew that big things had happened, and more were about to

happen. What they didn't know was just over the horizon - the events of Pentecost! Meanwhile, they didn't just rest on their laurels, but tried to move the situation forward in a way they thought best.

We constantly need to seek renewal as individuals, as a church. Of course, it is easier to do nothing, then we will never have to worry about any of our ideas being "still born". But if we earnestly seek, then although we might not always get things right, we do prepare the ground for God to take us in new directions. And sometimes the directions are surprising. No one at the time foresaw Pentecost, and the mission to the Gentiles. Yet these subsequent events shaped the future, and the form in which the New Testament comes down to us.

A life with frustrations is nevertheless ultimately fruitful through Christ. When we have made efforts in faith, Jesus supports us through our failures as well as our successes. So, if anything you've done "seemed like a good idea at the time" but was fruitless, don't despair. It's the same for all of us, it is part of the human condition. But it can lead to renewal, new directions, and strengthening if considered in the right way. No, we were not wrong to try. No, we should not let discouragement and disappointment overwhelm us, and convince us to inaction. Instead, we must stick with it and keep our eyes on Jesus.

### **Reading 2 - 1 John 5:9-13**

1 John 5:9-13 We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. 10 Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (NIV)

### **Talk Part 2**

Our next thought is "computer says no".

I've had a lot of involvement during my career in writing procedures. One thing I've learnt is that whenever you think you've got everything safely covered, you invariably haven't. In real life there are always exceptions, so designing a process to cover everything is impossible.

Unfortunately, there is always a human temptation to look at everything as simply as possible. It may make our world easier to live with, but unfortunately it isn't the real world. For example, "people in prison bad, people not in prison good" may be a comforting thought for some, but in reality, it is very far from the truth.

If the outcome to a procedure is, "computer says no", when it ought to say, "well, let's think about this some more", then you know you have a bad system on your hands. An inflexible 'no' seems like a faceless bureaucracy, treating people as numbers in a system. Exceptions should rather be treated with consideration and compassion.

Our second reading is an extract from a letter from an unknown author to an early church community towards the end of the first century AD. The letter contains some useful

Christian encouragement, but it is also at times confrontational and uncompromising. While a biblical literalist may happily ignore the contradictions, it really should give everyone pause for deeper thought.

A case in point is in our reading this morning. There is almost a threat - "anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar". If you didn't know the background, you might also read some extra baggage into this. For example, an implication that those "in the know", an inner group we perhaps might imagine, claim to have the monopoly on what the writer refers to as "God's testimony", and woe betide anyone who thinks differently! Is this tainted with arrogance? Certainly, it may be at odds with our own experience. Particularly if we have found after lifelong prayerful consideration that meaningful heavenly truth and understanding can be difficult to discern.

While there is also much that any Christian could agree with in this letter concerning eternal life in Jesus, the uncompromising parts sometimes seem at variance with encouraging new faith seekers through their first steps. But as always, there is an explanation in the context, showing how inadvisable it is to take what we read in the Bible at immediate face value.

This Epistle wasn't written to us at all, but to a bunch of early Christians who had serious problems with the incursion of a heresy - the Gnostic heresy, something derived from Greek philosophic style of thought. The Gnostics believed that all in this world was inherently evil. It followed that there was no point in caring for people in your community, since 'all flesh is evil' anyway. Also, the son of God couldn't really have been a flesh and blood person since that would have been 'evil'. So, according to them, Jesus only appeared to be human and only appeared to suffer, while really being God all the time.

The anti-Christian implications in this heresy are enormous. It makes a nonsense of the crucifixion; it makes a non-event of the resurrection. It produces in its adherents an obsession with matters that are spiritual only - since concern with any temporal matters would be 'evil'. It was a dangerous heresy that had to be addressed so the believers in that community would not lose their way. And that explains much of the emphasis in 1 John on the importance of Jesus the real, human saviour who really dies and really rises again for us. Jesus the giver of eternal life. Jesus, revealing God's love for the world.

Those Gnostics who were claiming otherwise were calling God a liar through failing to believe Jesus' own testimony and the example of his life, death, and resurrection. No wonder the author uses strong words, trying to steer his Christian flock away from this error, to which some had already succumbed due to charismatic Gnostic preaching.

So, after reflection it turns out that this is not a "black and white", "computer says no" epistle, after all. Context is everything. Context reveals it as a vital attempt to retrieve some believers who were being tempted dangerously off track.

We are called to show the same love that Jesus demonstrated for us, through his life, death and resurrection. Such love as he continues to show through his Holy Spirit. That means not having snap "black and white" judgements, not rushing to simple solutions to life's problems, including quick and easy assumptions about what we read in the Bible. But instead to contemplate these matters, discover the love of God, and then to love others with a consideration that we would wish for ourselves.

**Hymn** – Through all the changing scenes of life.

Suggested YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBkorDtz1nU>

### **Reading 3** - John 17:6-19

John 17:6-19 "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. 9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 11 I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name -- the name you gave me -- so that they may be one as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

13 "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 19 For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. (NIV)

### **Talk Part 3**

My last thought is "Great message, wrong place and time".

One of the things that politicians must learn quickly is that timing is everything. It was Harold Wilson who once said that "a week is a long time in politics". Political fortunes can change as quickly as the British weather. History is littered with examples of politicians in government having to quit after getting their timing wrong, even if their ideas might have some merit.

In our last reading, from John's gospel, there is nothing odd about the ideas expressed, but the timing seems all wrong. Here we are, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter, yet we have shot back in this lectionary reading to the events on the day before the crucifixion, just before Jesus is betrayed in the garden. Strangely though, what we read here seems more like a bunch of post-resurrection thoughts, prayers, and blessings from Jesus to the disciples. Once again, context is everything if we are to explain this.

Is our picture of the Gospel writer as someone taking dictation, noting every word the Jesus says, as and when he says it? If so, think again, particularly in relation to John's gospel. We are looking at a free composition here. A post-resurrection meditation which was very much the product of that mature later Christian community for which John was writing. This passage is often called the 'high priestly prayer', positioned in John's account as having been given in the upper room.

But why did the Gospel writer put it there? Why make it pre-crucifixion instead of post-resurrection? The answer probably lies in the structure and intent of the Gospel. For John,

the crucifixion is the climax, the point where Jesus was “high and lifted up” in both senses of that phrase; Jesus achieving his ultimate glory. Since, in John, everything builds up to this point, it is understandable to see this post-resurrection meditation in a key pre-crucifixion slot in the gospel sequence. The very last sayings of Jesus as a free man prior to his arrest.

Jesus, seen as the ultimate High Priest, mediates between God and others: here to the disciples, sometimes to the world outside. By ‘world’, John usually means the world of unbelief. This reading shows what a difficult relationship Jesus and the disciples had with both the Jewish and the pagan Roman worlds.

Here we see another answer to the Gnostics in our previous reading from 1 John. Jesus in his prayer asks God to protect his disciples so that ‘they may be one’. Jesus commissions us to be remote only from the world of unbelief, unlike the Gnostics who aimed to be remote from everything worldly. On the contrary, we are required to be active in the world, reflecting the love of God through Jesus.

The modern secular world does creep into our churches. We absorb business practices. We are divided by denomination. Do we mirror secular society, or do we challenge it? We won’t solve these weighty issues instantly, but they are a reason for prayer as we continue to seek guidance from our Lord for the problems which assail the church of today, brought into even sharper focus by the pandemic.

All three readings today seem at first sight odd in some way or another, yet I hope by looking at them we have been able to see the Christian rays clearly shining through. From the perhaps slightly premature attempts of the disciples to sort things out after Jesus had left them, to the serious threat of the Gnostics and the necessary strong response in 1 John, to the deeply reflective product of that mature early church community, John’s Priestly Prayer of Jesus.

These were turbulent times for the early church, yet God in his love, revealed in Jesus, saw them through, took them in directions they didn’t perhaps expect, and kept them alive in the faith, without which we wouldn’t be here today.

May our God, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, similarly bless and guide us. We, with our very different problems in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But rooted in the past, sharing those same human motivations, reactions and outlooks that were at times a help, at times a hindrance, in the early church too.

One in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

### **Prayers/Intercession**

#### **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord Jesus, as your disciples in the world today,  
we thank you that your word of truth,  
your prayer of power and your heart of love,  
continue to protect, inspire and unite us  
as we live out our faith,  
build up our relationships,

and hold the world before you in prayer. **Amen.**

### **Prayers of intercession**

To our sacred world of worship, we bring our secular selves, with all the burdens of the people we know and love; all the burdens of the people we hear of and see; all the burdens of the people we laugh with and cry with.

All-powerful God, who understands our needs before we think and speak, we unload our pains and joys, our sorrows and our celebrations, and bring our prayers before you:

for the hurting and the hurt;

for the loved and the loveless;

for the young and old;

for believers and non-believers;

for those certain of their faith and those who waver;

for those of different faiths and identities from us;

for the ill and those in pain and distress;

for the dying and those whose bodies are etched  
with the marks of death and dying;

for the grieving whose minds are bewildered and burdened by grief.

All-powerful God, surround each and every one  
with the circle of your protection. **Amen.**

**Hymn - Love divine, all loves excelling.**

**Suggested YouTube link:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eb6xfRzjhg>

### **Blessing**

Send us out into the world  
believing your testimony,  
feeling your protection,  
trusting your promises.

In the name of Christ,  
who gives our life purpose.

And the blessing of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Be with us all,  
Now and evermore. **Amen.**

### **AND FINALLY, a closing organ voluntary:**

I also shared this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NKjyPvR3t4>

with Barton Methodist Church when writing an online service during an earlier lockdown. If you enjoy hearing a good organ and organist, then have a look – it will sound best on a good computer sound system, of course. Leo Sowerby's 'Pageant' is a 10-minute-long piece which only professional organists of the highest ability can play. It is written to be played mostly on the pedals. If you only heard but didn't see it, you might not guess this. But the video shows



exactly what the organist must achieve. He or she must become a ballet star, leaping around, sometimes playing three or four notes at the same time just with their feet. Incredible!