

Howick Presbyterian Church Service of Worship
Sunday, 19th April 2020 @ Home

CALL TO WORSHIP

Matt: Come to worship Jesus Christ, risen forever.

All: Come to rejoice in life born out of death.

Matt: Come to grasp hope in the face of fear.

All: Come to find forgiveness for your sins.

Matt: Come to release your doubts into the very presence of God.

All: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Let us worship God!

Let's sing, O Praise the name

SONG: O PRAISE THE NAME

I cast my mind to Calvary
 Where Jesus bled and died for me.
 I see His wounds, His hands, His feet.
 My Saviour on that cursed tree

His body bound and drenched in tears
 They laid Him down in Joseph's tomb.
 The entrance sealed by heavy stone
 Messiah still and all alone

*O praise the name of the Lord our God
 O praise His name forever more
 For endless days we will sing Your praise
 Oh Lord, oh Lord our God*

Then on the third at break of dawn,
 The Son of heaven rose again.
 O trampled death where is your sting?
 The angels roar for Christ the King

He shall return in robes of white,
 The blazing Son shall pierce the night.
 And I will rise among the saints,
 My gaze transfixed on Jesus' face

OPENING PRAYER

God of resurrection hope, as you have raised Jesus Christ from death, raise us to new life in your tender care. Draw near and fill us this day with your Holy Spirit.

Call us back from places of distraction, even when we are at home in lockdown. In this time of new daily routine, may we always be aware of your constant presence with us. Show us the path of true life, that we may know joy beyond joy in your light.

We pray as you taught us to pray together:

*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,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

KIDS TIME AND BIRTHDAYS/ANNIVERSARIES

Hello to any boys and girls who are reading, listening to or watching this!

What was this week like for you? Did you do anything different or exciting? Did some of you start up home learning again this week? What was the best part about that? What was the trickiest part?

Ally is going to read another story for you.....

Today we also celebrate everyone who had a birthday or anniversary this week. We give thanks to God for your life amongst us! You have made this world so much better for so many! This will probably be one of the stranger birthdays you've had but you are still worth celebrating!

KIDS PRAYER

Dear God,
It's been a strange few weeks!

Thank you for all the people in the world that are helping other people who are sick, or struggling.

Thank you for the people running the supermarkets and other important places.

Please help scientists and doctors find a cure for this virus.

Please help people who are feeling sad or afraid. Help them to be brave and calm.

Help us to be kind to each other at home, and to have special times together too.

Thank you that you love us and that you are always with us, especially in tough times.

Amen.

What do we say each week? “God loves us and we are special!”

SONG: BE STILL FOR THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
 The holy One, is here;
 Come bow before him now
 With reverence and fear
 In him no sin is found
 We stand on holy ground.
 Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
 The holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
 Is shining all around;
 He burns with holy fire,
 With splendour he is crowned:
 How awesome is the sight
 Our radiant king of light!
 Be still, for the glory of the Lord
 Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
 Is moving in this place:
 He comes to cleanse and heal,
 To minister his grace -
 No work too hard for him.
 In faith receive from him.
 Be still, for the power of the Lord
 Is moving in this place.

READINGS

Psalm 13

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

³ Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise,

for he has been good to me.

John 20:19-31 (NIV)

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON – “Doubting Thomas”

I remember some time ago I was shocked to hear that one my Christian hero’s went through a time of doubting her faith. These were the words found in her journal.

I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer — no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ... Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them — because of the blasphemy — If there be God — please forgive me — When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

These were the words of Mother Theresa. She was model Christian to the world – and here she was, struggling with doubt and uncertainty.

My initial reaction was shock, but then relief – for I had gone through such times. And I came to wonder, what if going through doubt is actually part of the journey – maybe even a healthy part in some ways.

Doubt has often been seen as having the opposite of faith. A bad thing. A sign your faith is somehow vulnerable, or in decline.

I want to challenge that idea today.

If you’re like many Christians, at some stage in your life you will have experienced doubt in your faith. Although you may not ever have dared admit it.

This experienced has often been described throughout history as the Dark night of the soul - John of the Cross/Teresa of Avila.

“The ‘dark night’ is a sense of painful alienation and distance from God that causes distress, anxiety, discouragement, despair, and depression. All Christians experience this sooner or later— some more intensely than others, some for longer times than others. But the feeling is the same: they lose their sense of closeness to God and conclude that they no longer have faith. And so they despair even more.”

Doubting God’s action.

Doubting God’s goodness.

Doubting what we believe about how we thought God should act and behave.

Doubting that God is even there.

Many of the great Christian figures in our heritage have walked through such times.

Our character today is that of Thomas. He is often vilified as the doubting disciple – though they all express doubt at various stages. But was he really that bad??

He loved Jesus, and he was courageous (John 11:16)

He thought it was all over at the cross and isolated himself in grieving.

And when he speaks with the disciples about his doubt he is incredibly honest. He knew he wouldn't still his doubts by pretending they didn't exist.

When Jesus finally comes to him, Jesus is incredibly accomodating of Thomas – and patient with him. He doesn't scold him, and he allows Thomas to touch his hands. He simply says that he will need to learn to believe without seeing.

Thomas is not the only doubter in the bible. There's Abraham and Sarah, Gideon, Jeremiah, the Psalmist, the disciples, and others.

A third of the Psalms are songs of questioning, uncertainty and doubt.

If the biblical authors have the freedom to express their uncertainty in their hymns to God, then surely we have that permission too.

Like Jesus with Thomas, God wants our honesty. He can handle it. It's better to express it, rather than pretend it isn't there. Only then can we deal with.

Not only that, God himself enters into something of doubt and uncertainty in Jesus. His uncertainty in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his anguish on the cross as he quotes one of the Psalms of Lament, Psalm 22.

Experiencing doubt, and honestly expressing it is okay. It is healthy. It is a spiritual exercise.

Why are we so uncomfortable with it then?

Maybe because we desire certainty. To know everything. To put God in a box.

But we're not meant to. We are trying to understand the vast greatness of God after all. We are limited in our human nature.

The first temptation in Genesis was to eat from the tree and become all knowing like God. Maybe this is a clue. We were never meant to have it all tightly worked out.

There are other words in scripture that remind us of this.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully... 1 Cor 13:12

My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts. Is 55:9

I read this quote that I want to share with you.

"For many people in our world, the opposite of faith is doubt. The goal, then, within this understanding, is to eliminate doubt. But faith and doubt aren't opposites. Doubt is often a sign that your faith has a pulse, that it's alive and well and exploring and searching. Faith and doubt aren't opposites; they are, it turns out, excellent dance partners."

Mother Teresa also said these words.

"I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust" - Mother Teresa

I am reminded of the words of the Father of a son with a demon – "Lord I believe – help my unbelief." Mark 9:23-25

If we ignore our doubts, then we don't deal with them. It is far better to acknowledge them and bring them to the surface in the presence of God.

In our lives we try and escape doubt, uncertainty and suffering, by doing other things, but they linger and escalate afterwards. You have a far better chance of dealing with them by acknowledging them and not letting them have power over you.

I believe my faith is stronger when I make room for doubt and uncertainty.

Why is this important?

Because many people leave faith altogether because they think faith and doubt can't live side by side.

They've been told they are "naughty doubting Thomas".

Instead, we need to welcome and support seekers, doubters, those who have drifted away, those who are angry at God.

Faith communities should invite people to come and bring all these things to the table.

Just like the words of that beautiful hymn:

***Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.***

If you are struggling with doubt:

- Know that it's okay. You are in the company of many hero's in the bible.
- Be honest with your doubt before God.
- Pray those prayers from the bible we touched on today.
- Continue to do the work of God – help the poor and suffering. Like Mother Teresa did.

You may in fact find God there, and a deeper, richer, more trusting faith.

One day you will see those nail scarred hands, but even before then you will have mustered the faith to still believe.

May we be a people who trust, and be content not knowing all the answers.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION – *Fr. Michael Graham, S.J.*

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health and making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

We pause to remember those we are concerned for now. (Pause)

And during this time when we may not be able to physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbour's.

Amen.

Thank you for joining together this morning in worship.

Let's close this time and sing, Dear Lord and Father of mankind

CLOSING HYMN: DEAR LORD AND FATHER OF MANKIND

1 Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
 forgive our foolish ways;
 reclothe us in our rightful mind,
 in purer lives thy service find,
 in deeper reverence, praise.

2 In simple trust like theirs who heard
 beside the Syrian sea
 the gracious calling of the Lord,
 let us, like them, without a word
 rise up and follow thee.

3 O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
 O calm of hills above,
 where Jesus knelt to share with thee
 the silence of eternity,
 interpreted by love!

4 Drop thy still dews of quietness,
 till all our strivings cease;
 take from our souls the strain and stress,
 and let our ordered lives confess
 the beauty of thy peace.

5 Breathe through the heats of our desire
 thy coolness and thy balm;
 let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
 speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
 O still, small voice of calm!

BLESSING

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Amen.

Sources: The United Church of Christ
 Fr. Michael Graham, S.J.