

Christ Church Lewes
(United Reformed and Methodist)

Resurrection
“Made like him, like him we rise”

The Easter Season
17 April to 5 June 2022

(Lectionary Year 3)

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 the readings heard in church during the Easter Season. Visitors to the church and those attending week-night events are also invited to take a copy. Much of the text was written in 2019, with the help of my wife Marion. We have corrected minor errors and rewritten some passages where, through our own worship, our faith has enriched in the last three years.

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. [In the booklet, most of the words in italics are technical terms used in Biblical studies and discussion of Christian worship. Where possible, they are 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 experienced directly only by Jesus' followers, who, despite his humiliation and suffering, perceived the Christ in him, dimly at first, but with increasing conviction over the years. 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. Christian 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 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 70AD, to make sure that the foundation of Jewish teaching was preserved. The canon of the *New Testament* was finally established, after much discussion, about 360AD. 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 collection 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 then joined the Church.

By about the fourth century AD, particular readings had become associated with the distinct seasons of the year and the leaders of the Church circulated schedules that became known as *lectionaries*. More recently these have been brought together by the main denominations into 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 2022 are from the third year in the cycle, Year C. 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 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 truly unblemished image, despite, 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 with them, as the title of this booklet suggests.

Years A and B present slightly different perspectives.

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 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. Through his disciples, 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 disciples are often so conscious of the presence of Jesus that the gospel writers or *evangelists* describe him as someone who can be seen and touched. At other times, even in the same passage, the evangelists present Jesus as in the community of 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. All these characteristics are implied by the word *Church*.

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 50 days in the section called **For further reflection**.

17 April 2022 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

Have you ever asked yourself why this passage from Scripture has been chosen, by the Church throughout the world, as the first to be read on the most important Sunday of the year? It was written about 85AD, after the two principal leaders of the Church, Peter, and Paul, had been executed (about 64AD), after Jerusalem and the Temple, where Jesus taught, had been reduced to rubble (70AD), and when followers of Jesus had been scattered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region.

The selected verses are attributed to Peter at the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius, a new convert. Most scholars suggest however that the passage should not be read as a verbatim account of what Peter said. It is much more important, and more carefully constructed, than that. It is better viewed as an up-beat manifesto or mission statement of what Luke thought the Church was about, from his perspective in 85AD Antioch.

The Church had lost two of its most prominent leaders, but its self-understanding had been deepened as the boundaries of its mission had expanded. The dispersion from Jerusalem and the mingling of Jewish refugees with traders from other nations not only enabled it to build on, enrich, and expand its Jewish heritage, but also to free itself from restrictive food regulations (See the rest of Acts 10) so Jews and Gentiles could be united in one *Eucharist*, the meal that Jesus himself had shared with his disciples and that he had asked them to share in his memory.

Today, Easter day, Christians from all over the world renew their baptismal vows, reaffirm their belief in God, and in his Son Jesus Christ and celebrate their new birth through the Holy Spirit. The Church is again renewed and reinvigorated. Resurrection *continues!*

A detailed examination of the text follows.

1. God is God of all nations, supreme in the whole world (v 35). The expression 'to fear God' means 'to actively respect him' or 'to do what is right'. It looks to the future, rather than to past failure, and is positive rather than constrictive. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10).
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 and baptised by John the Baptist. He brought teaching and healing to the people (vv 37-38), 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 Jesus' teaching, and to his steadfastness till the very last moments of his life (v 39).
5. Jesus' authority was not recognised by the Jewish religious authorities. The Roman governor crucified him (v 39).
6. But this was not the end; his death brought him to life in his followers. His true nature was revealed (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). Luke describes this as "those who witnessed him and ate and drank with him" after he rose from the dead. We know from other documents from the early church that some people believed that Jesus was not fully human and that he retained magical properties. Luke was keen to refute this heresy. To our 21st century ears, however, his words imply that Jesus's body was physically reconstituted (See also Luke 24:43). Some scholars have suggested that Luke was referring to meals where Jesus was especially remembered – for example at Emmaus (Luke 24:30), the Sea of Tiberias, (John 21:13), or (probably) the gatherings in the Upper Room on the first day of the week. It was in the Eucharist that followers of Jesus realised his presence most powerfully.
7. Jesus's life, death, and eternal pre-eminence serve 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) and to be offered forgiveness 'in his *name*,' i.e., in accord with his true nature.
9. Luke makes an important point between the lines. Peter, who denied his association with Jesus, not once but three times in one night, became the spokesman for the whole Church. What greater testimony can there be to the transformative power of the Resurrection in individuals, as well as in the Church as a whole?

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

This psalm was sung at the end of the Passover Feast, which celebrates the rescue of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It may 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 repetition is common in passages used *liturgically* i.e., in communal worship.

The verses included in the readings 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 victory is attributed in thanksgiving and rejoicing to the Lord’s (God’s) support.

The psalm provides three of several striking images that the early Church found in the Jewish tradition, to express their Resurrection experience.

1. The Resurrection is a *gate* (vv 19-20). The Crucifixion of Jesus was not an end; on the contrary, it was a way forward to new possibilities, which include *us*. The congregations, of which we are part, are included in the Easter story and we are drawn into the Easter celebrations.
2. Jesus was the *chief cornerstone* (v 22), the stone the builders [Jews] rejected. This marks the foundation and determines the orientation of the new building [the Church, open to all peoples, whether Jews or not]. Luke also uses the metaphor in a speech from Peter before the elders and scribes (Acts 4:11), suggesting that the psalm had, by the time he was writing, 40 years after the Crucifixion, become part of the way the Church defined itself.
3. The Resurrection is “*the day that the Lord has made* (v 24).” It is celebrated each Sunday as new creation, when darkness is banished, and life prevails over death.

All three metaphors refer explicitly to the part played by God, whose supreme attribute is to build and renew i.e., to *create* (Genesis 1:2).

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

The letters of Paul, who was executed in Rome about 64AD, preceded the gospels, so they give us some of the earliest comments on 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 about 20 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 this passage written at the boundary of what words can express, 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 contaminated by 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 broken relationship of the *Fall* (Genesis 2-3) is made good again.

John 20 1-18

The two final chapters of the fourth gospel contain the most mature reflection about the Resurrection in the whole of Scripture. We can read them in several ways:

- as simple narratives of what happened on the third day after the Crucifixion
- as Ancient World stories whose meaning is implicit rather than spelt out
- as a framework for consideration of the significance of the Resurrection from the second century to the present.

The way we take them depends on where we are ourselves, but that means that we can read them again and still find something new. Reading them 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 and 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 it, in the tomb among the dead.

This was the first step of a new journey, a sign of something unexpected, something they had overlooked (v 9), and a sense that something profound and wonderful was to unfold them both individually (Mary, John, and Peter in turn) and together. Here are some points to ponder.

1. The empty tomb with its neat linen indicates that the body had not been stolen (v 2). John suggests that Jesus’ earthly life had come to an orderly end, not a confused one. His mission was accomplished (John 19:30)
2. In describing the tomb as “empty”, is John pointing to the *transcendence* of the risen Christ? He is one with the *unseen* God of Jewish tradition, there at the beginning (John 1:1) and still there when all earthly things are removed and neatly rolled up. 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.

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 used 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 more tentative. Faith always has the potential to grow.

The allusions that underpin the narrative of the empty tomb are also apparent in John's account of 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. She realises that Jesus *is* alive but his 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. Instead, he is 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. By extension, we find him in the Church and in all those around us who believe in him and are committed to him. The new relationship shows the indissoluble unity between the risen Christ and his Father in Heaven. This relationship draws in all his disciples (vv 17-18). See further commentary on the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

The Collect, revised in 1978, is based on one that has been used on Easter Day since the seventh century. The "mighty" Resurrection reveals something profound about the nature of God. Jesus is not among the grave clothes but with his disciples. The old is made new; the rejected stone is made the cornerstone. Sin and death that separate humankind from the life and power of God have been overcome. Through the renewal of our baptismal vows, we are enabled to put the "old order" aside and become "alive in Jesus Christ" and, through him, share in God's glory.

24 April 2022 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. After the Crucifixion, the Jews and Pilate thought Jesus would soon be forgotten and were unsurprisingly annoyed to find that his followers spoke of him as if he were still alive. Likewise here, the High Priest 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 daybreak" (v 21) (*cf* John 20:1). The officers could not find them (v 24) (*cf* John 20:2). 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 with prompting from the religious authorities. He was, however, not dead (v 30). 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 through a gate (v 20) to a new life of righteousness and to the four corners (horns) of the altar (v 27), 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, and 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 164BC).

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 points the 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 a *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

In the commentary for Easter Day, it was suggested that the gospels were ambiguous about whether the implications of the Resurrection were immediately apparent (as, perhaps, suggested in John 20:8) or whether they became clear gradually over time (as suggested in Mark 16:8, Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:11,25,38, and in today's passage from John's gospel. [There is no logical inconsistency here. The Resurrection is perceived differently by different people. Our perception of the Resurrection may depend on whether we come to believe by sudden revelation or patient reflection.]

John describes 'the first Christian Sunday.' He tells us that the disciples met 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 (vv 19,21) the greeting "Peace be with you" that is still heard each Sunday. They became conscious of the presence of Jesus their Lord in a new way, giving them 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). Their role as mediators 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 (Adam's) nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being". Luke makes the coming of the Holy Spirit into a spectacle (See commentary for Pentecost Sunday below); John suggests that followers of Jesus became aware, through worship and common resolve, of the presence and empowerment of the Spirit already within them.

The passage is presented as an eye-witness account of the first week or two after the Crucifixion. However, the details suggest that John is writing about the Church in his own day when the pattern of worship had become more established.

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 in the Upper Room 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, to put it another way, 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 extended passages of teaching, known as *discourses*, 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. The words "My Lord and my God!" express insight that far surpasses that of the other disciples. They are affirmed to this day in the Creed. However, when John wrote them, they had a much sharper political edge. They were used by the Roman Emperor Domitian (51-96AD) to describe the importance of his own position. Some commentators suggest that the appropriation of the title by the Christians for *their* leader could go some way to explain the savagery of the imperial persecution in the first two centuries.

The words of v 31 summarise John's *Good News*. His gospel has been written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [Messiah in the Jewish tradition], the Son of God ['of the same nature as God', in the Christian tradition], and believing you may have life in his name" [in close association with him as adopted brothers and sisters]. They mark the end of the main gospel text. Chapter 21 is clearly an appendix added after the original was complete, but the content and style show that it was almost certainly written by the same author.

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, to follow Christ, and to know him more fully.

1 May 2022 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. There was inevitably inner conflict in 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 '*belonging to 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 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 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 rescued. 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 (v 5). His sorrow is turned to joy, and his voice is raised in thankfulness and praise (vv 11-12).

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). Apart from 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 Cross and the Resurrection 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 time as referring to the status of adopted sons and daughters of God. As night changes to dawn, the disciples' community will revive and expand.
2. Jesus has prepared a meal. The disciples know him as he 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 is united in worship: "Amen".

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 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. *Taken as a whole*, however, 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(hold). The Hebrew means both the building and the people who live in it. There God's goodness and mercy 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 teaching (or *discourse*) of John 10 (See further below), 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 window, there is one face: the two perspectives are brought together.

Revelation 7:9-17

The writer of the Book of Revelation describes several 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 entirely 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 of Easter 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. He is bound to them by a Covenant, made by God himself, who never fails, and sealed by his steadfast obedience on the Cross. Through this Covenant he nurtures and nourishes them, and empowers them to follow him in doing the will of his Father so that their lives become more like his. And, as the doxology affirms every week, he reigns in unity with the Father and the Spirit, one God for all time.

15 May 2022 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, by the threefold repetition of the challenge (v 10), that the heart-searching was within Peter himself?

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 strength to live differently, so that they expressed something of the presence of God himself. The narrative 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 *later* by what has been called '*growth in holiness.*'

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 like 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, 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 (Acts 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 100AD.

1. The words "a new heaven and a new earth" (v 1) 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 the 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 comprise 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 when he was crucified. Because of the importance 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 become his brothers and sisters. By implication (v 32), they would become adopted sons and daughters of his Father.

Words cannot adequately capture the profundity of this astonishing claim. Jesus is leaving a frail group of disciples not only to follow a set of commandments as set out in Jewish Law, but to go much further. They were to take on the very nature of God and to show the integrity, compassion, and willingness to put others first, even if it meant losing their own lives. All this is implied in the deepest, costliest sense by the word ‘love’. Those who respond will also share in the glory of the Father as shown in Jesus and reflected in his disciples.

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 clarity. United with him they come to represent him and others see the risen Lord in them.

22 May 2022 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 enthusiastic 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 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 respect his precepts cut themselves off from his goodness and mercy. That is the ultimate disaster that we recognise every time we say the Lord's Prayer.

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 [By the time Revelation was

written, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed]. 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) alludes to 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".

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 clear by the life and teaching of Jesus, who is himself the Way. Through him we have a truly authentic understanding of the Father, discern his will more clearly (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.

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

For many of the people who live in the roads round our church, the first page of Acts, the second part of Luke's two-volume account of the life and importance of Jesus, evokes bemusement or scorn. Educational psychologists call this *cognitive dissonance*; a student is expected to assent to two mutually exclusive statements, when neither can be cast aside. If we assume the passage to be a scientific, historically accurate, account of what happened outside Jerusalem 40 days after Jesus' crucifixion, it cannot be true. Living bodies do not float up into the sky. Luke, however, wrote in a pre-scientific world and his account was not scientific as we understand the word. He was describing, about 50 years after the Crucifixion, the conviction of thousands of others, scattered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world, that Jesus was decisively victorious over all that was contrary to the nature of the One he called Father.

After linking his Gospel with Acts, Luke recounts the disciples' difficulty in finding words to articulate two conflicting propositions. It was clear that Jesus was no longer physically present, and yet, 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 but it would be *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.

A comparison of Luke's accounts of Easter Day and Ascension Day similarly shows 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, after 2000 years, we realise that the presence of the risen Christ, in a continually renewed group of disciples, *is* the Second Coming.

Luke and his contemporaries came to speak of this continuing presence 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 each baptism becomes a divine *creative* act.

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 100AD, after Paul's death and about the time of Luke-Acts, by a devoted follower. 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*" i.e., enshrined in Jewish tradition. 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, not physically but 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.

29 May 2022 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 last Sunday. Luke brings us this dramatic story of an 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.

However, we know from other passages that Luke’s narratives, such as the Christmas story of Luke 2 or the account of the journey to Emmaus (Luke 24) are carefully structured to make profound theological points. So why did Luke include it? Preaching the gospel inevitably encounters 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), demonstrate the power evident in the lives of those who follow 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 many people were baptised after a powerful speech, almost spontaneously, apparently with little preparation. Later it became clear that some of the teaching (doctrine) of the new religion was being misunderstood. It became customary for converts to undergo a period of induction before the actual initiation rite, to preserve the coherence, consistency, and 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 3). 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. This does not mean that passages of Scripture can be deleted in a cavalier fashion. Compilers omit verses only after detailed study and very careful consideration. We sometimes describe the second coming as the presence of the risen Christ in the Church. He is Alpha and Omega, beyond all time (v 13), and at the same time accessible to every individual person (v 12) Those who truly follow God's commandments, as displayed in Jesus Christ, have the "right to the tree of life". They are true humans, unlike the first human, Adam, who failed to do God's will. 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* or *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.

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, and spoken of as embodying Christ himself. 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).

Psalms 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 64AD, 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 throughout the empire. At the heart of this thinking was the emerging concept of the *Holy Spirit*.

The passage is like 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 14-year 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 (vv 16-17) 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". 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 its implications are profound. *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), cut themselves off from this support and the Father's cleansing mercy (John13:11).

It is notable that God is referred to as *Father* both in Philip's question and Jesus' reply. 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*, pointing to new possibilities, giving right judgments, comfort (used in its original sense of strengthened 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 360AD. 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 the whole of Scripture 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 use of the lectionary allows us to view the readings in our 50-day Easter celebration as a coherent piece of teaching, and to draw from them the insight that we are ready, in our own faith development, to receive.

As an example, we can take the title of this booklet. It comes from Charles Wesley's Easter Day hymn (RS 232, StF 298). Do we really believe that we are made like him (Jesus)? What do we mean when we sing with countless others: "like him we rise?" Many of those who are not regular churchgoers would agree that, though we don't really know exactly what

happened to Jesus, the events in Jerusalem in the first century are among the most important the world has known. The inception and development of the Church point to a world-changing shift in understanding the meaning and purpose of the universe, and the place of human life in it.

Lest we become smug, however, it is advisable to read the whole of Charles Wesley's couplet:

Made like him, like him we rise,
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

The poetry is not the greatest; it sounds quaint and eighteenth century, but its logic is clear. We can meet the one eternal God in worship only because we have something of his nature in our own DNA. When our relationship with God is broken it can be healed only through a human being whose own bond with his Father is unbroken. Jesus is risen *because* he was obedient to his Father's will, even though his obedience cost him his human life. We may or may not be required to give our lives, but, if we, like him, are to simultaneously reach our full potential as human beings, and as sons and daughters of God, we are challenged to follow in the way he embodied.

We end with the words of St Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390AD), Archbishop of Constantinople and Nazianzus, and revered in both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. He is notable for his oratorical skill, and for his significant contribution to the concept of the Trinitarian God.

"We need God to take our flesh and die, that we might live. We have died with him, that we may be purified. We have risen again with him because we have died with him. We have been glorified with him because we have risen again with him."

I thank Marion for access to her commentaries and theological books. She has given me encouragement over many years. I also thank the Mission Committee for support, Liz and Tom Lunt for proofreading, and Neil Fisher for reproducing the booklet for distribution. DS

