

## Act of Worship at Home for Sunday 12 May 2024

Today we celebrate the last Sunday of Easter, following the feast of the Ascension celebrated on Thursday; next Sunday will bring Pentecost. It's a busy time in the church calendar and it is also the start of Christian Aid week. Easter and Pentecost have a central theme of Love as it was because Jesus loved us that he gave up his life for us and, in love, he sent the Holy Spirit to support the disciples and which continues to support us today. The theme for this year's Christian Aid week is Extraordinary Love. Here are words from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John chapter 3: "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*" As we worship, let us experience the overflowing compassion and tenderness of our God. Let us absorb the love that God bestows on us.

### Reading

Our reading is taken from Acts Chapter 1, verses 1-12: *'In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'*

*After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.'*

### Reflection

Thursday 9 May brought with it Ascension Day, the 40th day of Easter, occurring 39 days after Easter Sunday. The Book of Acts begins with a brief account of the times that Jesus appeared to his disciples and talked to them about the Kingdom of God. They were still thinking in earthly terms: "Lord are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He has to tell them that it will be their job to tell others about the Kingdom of Heaven, yes in Jerusalem, but also to the ends of the earth. And then he disappears from their sight again – taken up into heaven.

Just imagine for a moment what the disciples have been through. This has come to my mind a lot over the past few weeks. A good friend of ours died on Easter Sunday. We had seen her the week before she died and knew her death was imminent but then she was gone. Rod and I are her executors and she has left us a big job to gather in all her estate and distribute it. It has taken us to Surrey and to Yorkshire and there have been times when we have been exhausted. I have also had times where I have felt, not so much that she is talking to me, but that she is guiding me or I am at least walking on the path she wants me to follow. Part of that is grief – not being able to believe that the person has gone. Someone is large in your life one moment and gone the next.

Just think about the poor disciples – men from very ordinary backgrounds who had so much to learn in the three years that they followed Jesus in his ministry. They had to witness betrayal, an unfair trial and then saw their friend and master die an agonizing death. He had told them he would rise from the dead but I don't think they had ever really believed that until they saw him. They had 40 days of his company as he taught them what they needed to know to take forward his

work. Those 40 days must have flown by just as Rod and I have found the last 6 weeks have flown by. Then, he was gone again and they were left gazing up at the clouds, tears streaming down their faces. They must have felt that he had left them to face the world alone, abandoned them when they felt they needed him most. Why? The fact was that they had to lose him in order to find him in his true, heavenly form; in a form that could be with them day by day with the help of the Holy Spirit who came to them just days later. He had to die and, in dying, he defeated sin and set us all free. As he ascended into heaven, he sent his Spirit to support his disciples. Suddenly they had the strength to carry on and do extraordinary things in the name of Jesus. The same Holy Spirit strengthens us today.

That brings me to this year's Christian Aid week. This year they have chosen to draw our attention to the plight of the people of Burundi, one of the smallest countries in East Africa; smallest yet one of the most densely populated. Christian Aid is focusing on Aline Nibogora who was abused by her husband and forced out of her home, becoming separated from her children. Homeless, she was pushed into extreme poverty. But she did not give up. She joined a community workshop led by Christian Aid-funded trainers and learnt about Village Savings and Loans Associations which offer a way for community groups to manage, save and lend money. She was able to get a start-up loan and began trading avocados and peanuts. Then she was able to buy a bicycle so that she could transport her goods. Aline's business was successful and she was able to rent a house. She was reunited with her three eldest sons who came to live with her. She hopes that, one day, she will be together with all of her children. Aline can now afford food for herself and her family; she has bought solar panels so that her children can have light to help them study; she is even baking her own bricks and building a stronger home for her family, in every sense. She has persevered against the odds, persisting in faith, hope and love.

Jesus showed his disciples extraordinary love and, before he left them, he prayed for them. In fact, he prayed for all believers. He prayed "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you". We are one with Alina and the people of Burundi – God loves them just as he loves us; they are no different to us, just a lot poorer and in need of support even if we can afford only a few pence or pounds. In giving to Christian Aid, we show that same love that Jesus showed his followers. Extraordinary love. **Amen**

### **Let us pray**

God we thank you for your extraordinary love for us: love that changes us and turns our priorities upside down. We thank you for those who have shown us tenderness, care and compassion; those who have seen us through troubled times and brought us hope. We pray for those we love, and for those we have failed to love, often because we are not aware of their situation. We thank you for Christian Aid that brings to mind people around the world who are treated in a way that is less than human. We are mindful of people in this country who feel forgotten or unloved, especially the homeless. May we work together to uphold the dignity of every human being. God whose love endures forever, hear our prayer. **Amen**

**Our hymn** is number 783: 'Ubi caritas et amor' (Where there is charity and love, God is there):

Ubi caritas et amor,  
ubi caritas,  
Deus ibi est.

### **And now a blessing**

God of justice, mercy, and peace, help us to serve you. May your extraordinary love radiate through our words and actions, every day of our lives. Bless us, we pray, that we may persevere in faith; walk in hope, and act and speak with love, by the grace of God, our creator, redeemer, and comforter. **Amen.**