

ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM

24th May 2020: Seventh Sunday of Easter

Alternative Collect:

Risen, ascended Lord, as we rejoice at your triumph, fill your Church on earth with power and compassion, that all who are estranged by sin may find forgiveness and know your peace, to the glory of God the Father.

Hazel writes:

It has been very strange going out this past week with more people and traffic around. Everything looks the same, but life is so different – it's a kind of in-between time, a waiting time. This coming week is the one in the church year where we remember that time when the disciples were in a waiting time - waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit (although they didn't know that was what the gift would be). Prayer is critical at any time of waiting and the Thy Kingdom Come opportunities for prayer this week (see below) are an important part of what we can do to ensure that when we come out of lockdown (whenever that will be), we too can be changed for good by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thy Kingdom Come is being supported by many of the churches in West Wickham. This week we have the following opportunities to gather together in prayer:

On Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 9.30am, there will be a 30 minute **prayer meeting** on Zoom. We will use the prayer journal which is being circulated this weekend. If you have not received an invitation by e-mail or hard copy, please ask someone in the ministry team for the details.

On Saturday there will be a **Quiet Morning** from 10am to 12noon, with music, prayer, bible reading, reflection and an opportunity for you to have your own time for prayer inspired by these inputs. There will also be some suggested prayer activities for the morning, some of which will contribute to a project supporting the bereaved in our community. The Zoom meeting ID and password (and telephone number for those not on-line) is the same as for the prayer meetings, so please ask if you have not received the details.

Pentecost is known as the birthday of the church and we'll have a birthday party after the morning service on Sunday 24th May on Zoom – bring your own coffee and cake. The meeting will be open from 10.45 and we will start at 11am with finding out what people have appreciated in the on-line and paper-based materials that have been produced over the past couple of months. There will also be an opportunity for small groups to meet and catch up with each other.

Zoom can be used to set up smaller meetings, accessible both by 'phone and on-line and it's free to use for meetings of up to 40 minutes. Full instruction is available in many places, including the Zoom website: <https://zoom.us>. If you have any trouble setting up your own meeting, you can contact Gifty Nortey on 07813 797757 or Nicky Nightingale on 07771 782914 for advice.

Christian Aid Week –Thank you for all the donations made so far to Christian Aid. Please do continue to support these efforts with an on-line donation to our JustGiving page at <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/stfrancisandstmarywestwickham> and encourage your friends, family and neighbours to respond to the need at this time. We have now raised over £1,600 together with our friends from the Methodist Church.

Here are the answers to their photo quiz. It was really tough!

1	What is this?	Avocado pear
2	Where in the world was this taken?	Iceland or Arctic
3	Where in Europe was this taken?	Andorra or Pyrenees
4	Where in England was this taken?	Beverley, Yorkshire
5	What is this?	Wrought iron gate
6	What are these?	Callicarpa berries
7	Where was this taken?	Keston Ponds, nr Bromley
8	What is this?	Concorde
9	What is this?	Dahlia
10	Which building is this (in England)?	Westminster Abbey
11	What model of car is this?	Kia Cee'd
12	Where in the world was this taken?	Dubrovnik, Croatia
13	In which UK town were these taken?	Dunbar, Scotland
14	Where is this?	Emirates over the River Thames
15	What is this?	F1 racing car tyre
16	What is this?	Fabric walking boot laces
17	What is this?	Glass electric hob
18	What country is this?	Greenland
19	Where in the world are these 12 Apostles?	Great Ocean Road, Australia
20	What is this?	Hibiscus flower
21	Where is this?	Isle of Portland, England
22	What is the common name?	Orchid
23	In which country was this taken?	Poland
24	On which building are these tiles?	Sydney Opera House
25	Where in the world is this building?	Bruges
26	Where in the UK is this?	Lulworth Cove, Dorset
27	What is this?	Morse Code key
28	What is this called?	Angel of the North statue
29	Where in the world is this?	Toronto, Canada
30	What is this and where in the world is it taken?	Niagara Falls, Canada
31	Where in the UK is this?	River Thames, Pangbourne, Berks
32	Where in the UK is this?	Regents Park, London
33	Where in the world is this?	Scotland
34	What are these?	Shower handles
35	What is this?	Brass door handles
36	Where in the world was this taken?	Vancouver, Canada
37	What is this?	Vintage car horn
38	Where in the world is this?	Hong Kong
39	What is this?	Frosty spider's web
40	Where in the world is this?	Bondi Beach, Australia

Resources and updates for the week ahead – An audio file and PDF of the sermon and a video of the service have been posted to the websites for today. All other files have been combined together and posted as a pew sheet which has been sent on paper to those who have told us that they are not on-line. Please tell someone if you know of somebody who is not accessing this material.

Other worship and resources that you might want to listen to or look at on Sunday:

- The Church of England's national virtual service will be available on their website at www.churchofengland.org.
- The BBC have the following programmes to watch and listen to:
 - Sunday Worship at 8.10am on Radio 4: living well during this time of hoping and uncertainty;
 - Sunday Worship at 11.45am on BBC1. A service from Bangor Cathedral;
 - Songs of Praise at 1.15pm on BBC1: stories of faith from islands around our coastline.

Any items for the joint pew sheet to Hazel and items for the websites to brian.griff19@btinternet.com.

First reading: Acts 1:6-14

⁶When the apostles had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's

journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Gospel: John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence

with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.

¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION 2020 LET LOOSE IN THE WORLD

Heavenly Father, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake

AMEN

I have to admit preaching here today with just Hazel and myself in church feels a bit weird, but it does remind me of the very first sermon I ever preached, because that was also to an empty church building. Not that it was empty because the congregation fled the church when they realised that I was preaching – it was because my first sermon was an examination - I had to pass written and preaching exams to become a Reader back in the late 70's in Wales. So there I was in the pulpit in a large church near Cardiff – no sound system and the only people in church were me and the examining chaplain who was hiding behind a pillar scribbling notes on my sermon and deciding if I passed or failed. Yet this sermon is different because although we are not a physically gathered congregation in St Francis this morning and there's no one actually sitting there in the pews, it's important to say that we are still one body – we are spiritually gathered in homes throughout West Wickham, Shirley and beyond. We have been let loose from our building.

You've probably heard of John Masefield the famous poet who wrote 'Sea Fever' and 'Cargoes'. He also wrote a drama entitled 'The Trial of Jesus' – it's a Passion Play in 3 acts. Masefield has the centurion Longinus report to Pilate after the crucifixion of Jesus. Longinus had been the officer in charge of the execution – who said 'Surely this man was a Son of God'. After his official report, Pilate's wife, Procula, calls the centurion to come and tell her how the prisoner had died.

Once the account is given, she asks, "Do you think he is dead?"

Longinus answers, "No, Lady, I don't." "Then where is he?" asks Procula, to which Longinus replies, "Let loose in the world, Lady."

This is very much a central theme of the Ascension – Jesus being let loose in the world – not confined to time or to any particular place – but everywhere. This was something the disciples had to cope with. When he was taken up to heaven, they just stood there gazing up into the sky – they were bereft. They were already missing Jesus – they didn't know how to cope without him. In our reading from Acts we heard:

As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

They thought that now that Jesus had gone, this was the end. In fact, the Ascension wasn't an ending – it was a beginning. The disciples could have just stood there hanging around looking for a physical Jesus. However, things had changed dramatically. If people were to hear the good news of Jesus it was all up to the disciples now. The responsibility was theirs. What a huge challenge. But they were not abandoned to this task – they were not simply left to it. The presence of Jesus was as real now as it ever was. Their response was to go back to Jerusalem and wait – which they did with great joy and they stayed there. The disciples could have just got stuck into the task of preaching and teaching straight away. They knew that this is what they had to do. But they waited to be energized by the Holy Spirit. Without this period of waiting, reflecting, praising and praying they wouldn't have been very effective witnesses at all.

They couldn't go back to the good old days – which it seems that they wanted to do. Luke tells us that when they gathered on the mountain, they asked Jesus:

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Restoring the kingdom to Israel wasn't what it was all about – it's restoring God's Kingdom to the **world**. That's what our mission is today – it is about bringing the values of the Kingdom into the world around us. It's about being a bridge between God's Kingdom and the world. It's about showing the glory of Christ that the disciples witnessed at the Ascension to a largely sceptical and often hostile world. It's about reflecting the glory of Jesus – being mirrors of his glorious light – not just by words, but by deeds as well.

The Kingdom of God is a place where peace, justice, and equality meet and embrace. It is a Kingdom where the poor and those on the margins of our earthly society are valued and cared for. Remember the parable about the sheep and the goats. The sheep are those who care for the poor, needy and marginalised – the hungry, the naked, those in prison, those who are sick. The goats are those who are apathetic to their needs. They are those who like the Priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, pass by on the other side. The goats are those who are so wrapped up in their own problems that they fail to see the needs of others. The goats might bleat about the problems of the less fortunate in our society, but there is nothing practical about it. In the Kingdom of God we have to put our faith into action. Above all it's about being compassionate – it's about showing Christ's compassion through the example of our lives. We don't do this alone. In every situation Jesus accompanies us. His presence is very near and none of this would be possible without the Ascension – because, through the Ascension, Jesus has been let loose in the world.

Jesus knew how difficult this would be for the disciples so he prepared them for it. Our Gospel reading this morning is the latter part of Jesus' great high priestly prayer in which he looks back at his earthly ministry which he knows is now coming to a dramatic conclusion and he looks forward to the future where the disciples will carry on his work of spreading the good news and making new followers. It is significant that John places this great prayer immediately before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, and yet the church has placed it in the lectionary in the interim period between the Ascension and the great feast of Pentecost. It makes sense because the prayer is also seen as a farewell prayer – Jesus knows he is leaving the earth and going to his father so he prays for himself and his disciples. A look back together with a look forward.

In the last part of the reading Jesus “looks forward” to the time when the disciples will have to carry on the ministry he leaves behind on earth. He acknowledges that the disciples were chosen out of the world to be his witnesses. He knows that this will be a tough assignment for them and that they will be facing a hostile world – so he prays that his father will protect them – and that they may be united – just as Jesus and his father are united. It's very much the case that Jesus is preparing his disciples for a new beginning – a time when he would be let loose in the world.

I know from conversations with many members of our congregation, the burning question at the moment is ‘When will we be able to go back to church - When will this lockdown end?’ Not being in St Francis and St Mary's is for many of us a loss and many feel rather powerless and disorientated because our normal way of life has been completely disrupted. However, out of the loss has come a massive change. We have learned to be church in a very different way, and when we do go back to church we may have to worship in a very different way. So now, like the disciples after the Ascension, we are in a period of waiting. Nick Baines, who

used to be Bishop of Croydon, but now is Bishop of Leeds, writes a blog on the internet and recently he reflected on this sense of loss, endings and beginnings. Here's what he wrote:

Christian faith does not assume a life, or world, of continuous security and familiarity. It is fed by scriptures that speak of transience, mortality, provisionality, interruption and leavings. But, they also whisper that the endings are always beginnings – the leavings open a door to arrivals that could not have been experienced otherwise. In other words, the loss can be seen as a gift. So, as I have suggested to clergy in the Diocese of Leeds, we might be helped in articulating this by asking four questions: (a) what have we lost that we need to regain in the weeks and months ahead? (b) what have we lost that needs to remain lost – left behind in another country? (c) what have we gained that we need to retain in the future? (d) what have we gained recently that was useful for this season but needs to be lost if we are to move forward?

So, I wonder, will we see this period of enforced waiting that we are in at present end in a new beginning for St Francis and St Mary's? Can we rise to this new challenge? Maybe the four questions posed by Bishop Nick could form the basis of discussions for PCC's and in home groups – and I know that a PCC meeting using 'Zoom' at St Francis is planned in the next few weeks. Is it possible that from the loss and disorientation we can see a new beginning? Is it possible that we can see that this building is not the only place where we can worship? Can we see that Jesus has been let loose in the world?

Why do we stand staring into the sky?

Jesus is here, let loose in the world.

Look down at our hands.

Look at the way our hands bring peace.

Look at the way our hands give love.

Look at the way our hands soothe and heal.

Look at the way our hands share and give.

Jesus is here, let loose in the world.

Hymn of response – Hail the day that sees him rise.

You can find a YouTube clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjofDCZlyRY&t=17s>

1 Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!
glorious to his native skies. Alleluia!
Christ, awhile to mortals given, Alleluia!
enters now the highest heaven. Alleluia!

2 There the glorious triumph waits; Alleluia!
lift your head, eternal gates. Alleluia!
Christ hath vanquished death and sin;
Alleluia!
take the King of glory in. Alleluia!

3 Lord, though parted from our sight;
Alleluia!
far above yon azure height, Alleluia!
grant our hearts may thither rise,
Alleluia!
seeking thee beyond the skies. Alleluia!

4 There we shall with thee remain, Alleluia!
partners of thine endless reign, Alleluia!
there thy face unclouded see, Alleluia!
find our heaven of heavens in thee.
Alleluia!

Prayer Pointers

Give thanks that, through the Ascension, Jesus has been let loose in the world. May we always be open to being surprised by Him, seeing him in the everyday things of life – and reflecting His glory to those we are in contact.

For guidance of the Holy Spirit in the challenges ahead when we are allowed to return in some way to our churches. May we see that the return is not an ending, but a new beginning – a new opportunity to look back and look forward in hope and faith to new ways of engaging with our community and being the body of Christ in West Wickham

For all those in our congregations who are very vulnerable to Covid19 and who have been unable to leave their homes for two months and have no indication of when this might change. May they not lose hope and wait patiently, trusting in God and faithful in prayer.

Continue to pray for our Government as ministers work out how to ease lockdown further without causing more cases of the virus. May their decisions be wise and made for the good of our nation.

For schools as they debate whether to reopen and let children back into the classrooms. We especially hold before you those who have to decide – the Heads, Teachers and Governors.