

# Salford Methodist Circuit



**Very Much Alive! - 2nd May 2021**  
**Rev Clare Stainsby**

## **Bible Reading: Isaiah 53**

*Who has believed our message? To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm? My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected - a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.*

Welcome everyone as we share together once more in worship from a distance. Those words from Isaiah form the basis of the event in the Bible we're considering today.

Although Isaiah words date from 700 - 800 years possibly before Jesus walked this earth, these words are very much a part of our Christian story as they point to God's promised Messiah who we believe came to this earth in Jesus. They refer to the suffering he experienced, and the purpose of it all: to open up the gate to God's Kingdom to all who believe and accept his truth and love.

Let's celebrate our Christian faith in our first hymn.

## **Hymn: How Deep The Father's Love For Us**

*How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,  
That he should give his only Son to make a wretch his treasure.  
How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns his face away,  
As wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory.*

*Behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders,  
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.  
It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished;  
His dying breath has brought me life, I know that it is finished.*

*I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power no wisdom;  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.  
Why should I gain from his reward, I cannot give an answer,  
But this I know with all my heart, His wounds have paid my ransom.*



## Prayers

Loving Lord Jesus, our Saviour, our friend. It is through looking at the cross and the suffering that you went through on our behalf, that we begin to grasp the unfathomable depth of your love for us. You went all the way for us, holding back nothing, and in dying you broke us free from the chains of fear and death. We believe we will live for ever with you.

But we are alive in this place in this time now. Dealing with all the pains and challenges that life throws at us. Living with hopes and dreams. Valuing the signs of new life around us. And in all that happens in life, we celebrate that you are alive with us. Your death broke down unimaginable barriers, and we don't have to wait for eternity to know you, for you are beside us right now, right here, in every moment, ready to guide and encourage, ready to comfort and hold, ready to love and lead us on.

And so as we meet together in worship this day, we give you our praise for all that you are, and our gratitude for all that you have done for us. We open our hearts and our minds to all that you want to give to us, and to teach us. And we invite you to be very real in this place right now, wherever we are, as we share together and listen for your voice.

Accept our worship, accept our weaknesses, accept our heart-felt prayers of right now. And inspire us with visions of all that is before us, in the days ahead, for your churches and for your people, here in the area. We meet in the name of Christ. Amen

## Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name,  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
Now and forever. Amen.*

We're in that season - the Easter season- when we remember the time after Jesus's resurrection and all that happened. In the last few weeks we've heard quite a bit about how Jesus was seen alive once more. We've heard about how the disciples and others met with him and talked with him, all that they saw and heard, how they shared food with him. And how they knew beyond doubt that he was alive and that everything had changed because of that fact. Their faith was



renewed, and they discovered a new purpose and direction in their lives. Some of that we'll continue to hear about in the coming weeks.

The thing about Jesus being alive is that he wasn't just alive for a few weeks between Easter and Ascension then no longer around. Very far from it. Ascension, which will be coming up quite soon wasn't another death - it was simply a change. Jesus was no longer bound to one place at a time, but was alive in every place and every time through His Spirit - the Holy Spirit. That which is the presence of God was from the moment of ascension there everywhere always. The disciples discovered new energy from that fact at Pentecost which we'll celebrate in a few weeks' time.

We may see the season of Easter as being from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, but in reality, the significance of resurrection is with us every day. It's the reason the church came into being. It's the reason that every church was built. It's the reason that we exist as churches at all. If Jesus isn't alive and with us still, then there is absolutely no point to anything that we are and do as churches.

I don't know about you, but I don't feel pointless, or purposeless, or without meaning. For me Jesus is very much alive and very much active in this world. And the more I know of God - the longer I exist in his loving presence, the more sure of that I become of Jesus being alive and how it changed everything. It changed everything for the disciples, and it changes everything for us too. It changes our perspective on everything that this world throws at us, each and every day. We are never very far from the wonder and joy of the resurrection, and it impacts everything in our lives and in the lives of our churches.

The story set today comes from the Acts of the Apostles. It's a moment that happened to a couple of people who clearly talked about their experience of it, and Luke, the writer of the Gospel and of the book of Acts, chose to record it in his record of the life of the first century church. It has much to say to us about our life and purpose as God's people here and now. So let's hear that reading.

## **Bible Reading: Acts 8 : 26 - 40**

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:*



*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."*

*The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.*

So here are two people and their moment of meeting, that has remained in the history of our faith, because it was recorded in the book of Acts. Perhaps we need to know a bit about who they were before we can go any further.

Philip could be the Philip that was named as one of the disciples in the Gospels, but Luke specifically calls him Philip the Evangelist. And I guess that by the time this event occurred, all of the disciples and dozens of other people would have regarded themselves as evangelists - as those who saw their task to be to share the message of good news for all - good news that came from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We're told that 3000 people believed at Pentecost. And in a short time the message that they shared had spread far and wide across the regions of the Middle East and Europe, because they chose to share it. But Philip also gets a mention in Acts 6 as one of seven people chosen to lead and care for the people who had committed themselves to faith in Jesus Christ in Jerusalem and the area around. So it's most likely a different Philip from the one among the original twelve. These seven men were given roles in leadership and care by the original disciples because of their great faith and their positive influence. They were the original deacons in the church, but like deacons in the Methodist Church today they also have a role in preaching and teaching. And Philip is named by Luke as someone who saw his role to share the good news with the Samaritans - the Jews' neighbours and traditional enemies. So we know he was brave and very bold.

So what about the Ethiopian Eunuch. There's a lot that needs sifting through in that title! Ethiopia in the first century was roughly where it is now. And this man that Philip encountered was the chief lord of the queen's treasury. In that country the king was regarded as a god and therefore above dealing with matters of administration. So the queen was in charge of managing the practical affairs of state, and this was the queen's right-hand man. He was a eunuch,

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because he was working closely with women and he needed to be someone who could be trusted in every way. So he would have voluntarily accepted castration and a life of celibacy in order to fulfil his role in the kingdom.

So this powerful man was heading back home to north Africa - heading south west from Jerusalem where he had been participating in one of the great Jewish festivals. He wasn't a Jew, but he was curious about all things Jewish, and respectfully trying to understand the intricacies of Jewish faith.

Here he was in his carriage on the road leading south west from Jerusalem, and pouring over the book of Isaiah in a scroll, and wondering what it all meant. Philip then enters. He has been promoted by the Holy Spirit to go alongside this man and help him to understand. The carriage would be moving very slowly, and Philip was able to walk alongside and engage with the man. Philip heard the words of Isaiah 53 about God's suffering servant being read out loud, and he asked the Ethiopian if he understood what was going on. But the man had no idea.

Isaiah was a prophet of hundreds of years earlier who wrote about God's promised Messiah, the one who would come to begin God's kingdom on earth. Isaiah's words were greatly revered by the Jewish people, but they are also revered by us as Christians because they accurately depict the suffering that was experienced by Jesus in the final days of his life.

Philip hops into the carriage along side the Ethiopian and shares the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And shows him how Isaiah's prophecy relates to the Good News of resurrection and hope and new life. And we're told that the Ethiopian is so impressed by what he hears, so moved in his heart, that he asks to become a follower of Christ himself. There is a pool of water at the road side, and Philip baptises the man as a Christian. Philip then leaves, and the Ethiopian returns to his own country rejoicing, taking his new faith with him. And he doesn't keep it to himself. It's believed that he went on to share his faith with many others in his homeland, founding one of the earliest churches in north Africa.

This is a really significant story as it shows clearly that the message of Christian hope, and joy and love is a message that is for all people. There are no barriers of race, culture, wealth, power or geography. It's a message for everyone.

Let's sing another song, and then look at what this all means for us here and now.



## Hymn: He Is Risen

*He is risen, when doubts rise up within your mind,  
Look at his hands and at his feet, and touch him, see him, for he is risen.*

*Why be troubled, if your heart is burning within you,  
Open your eyes to recognise, and touch him, see him, so why be troubled.*

*He is risen, why seek the living among dead,  
He is no longer in the tomb, and touch him, see him, for he is risen.*

*The Son of man will be crucified by sinful men,  
And on the third day, bathed in light, He will rise again.*

*He is risen, when doubts rise up within your mind,  
Look at his hands and at his feet,  
And touch him, see him, so why be troubled, for he is risen.*

So what can we take from this story that might be important to us as Christians in this part of God's world, here and now?

I think we need put ourselves in the shoes of both Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. So let's think about the Ethiopian first. He wanted to know more about God. He had a longing for better understanding. And he bothered to try and find out more. He turned to the scriptures for his answers. We too will find out much more about God and our faith by reading the Bible, or listening to the Bible. It was then, and still is, at the heart of what we believe as Christians. But it's not always easy to understand. Even if we use a version that presents the words very simply and clearly, it's still not totally easy to grasp in terms of meaning. We have one Bible, but in every generation hundreds and thousands of books have been written to help our understanding of what is recorded there. And in every generation hundreds of people have developed their knowledge and understanding in order to instruct and guide others in the meaning of it all. The Bible is never going to be a walk in the park, though much of it holds great meaning and truth which can inform our lives from every direction. It's so worth digging into, not just via a superficial swing through the familiar stories, but a proper in depth look at what is going on, and what it means. The Ethiopian eunuch bothered to look into it. But he needed help to understand it. We all do. He wasn't afraid to ask. And when the meaning was explained to him, it changed his life. It not only changed the way he thought and the focus of his beliefs. It led him to share his faith with others.

Do we have the patience and the commitment, and the desire to know more? Are we willing to make some effort of our own to deepen our understanding? Are we willing to ask others for help, and to talk about the meaning of all that is there in the Bible? And are we willing to let it change and inform our whole lives? Those are big questions.



And what about Philip? He too was someone who had discovered for himself the deep truths at the heart of the Christian story. He may have known Jesus personally, or he may have come to faith in the early heady days of the Christian Church's beginnings in Jerusalem. Either way, he had allowed God to work in him, to give him confidence, and to lead him to those who were hungry for knowledge. Then he had the courage and the patience to share what he knew, allowing it to be life changing for others.

Have we been touched in the depths of our being by the truth and the power of the Christian message, opened up for us through the Holy Spirit at work in our lives? Have we the boldness that comes through commitment, and the assurance of God's guiding Spirit? Are we willing to be led to those who are questioning, and curious, and searching for meaning? And are we able to help point the way to Christ? The only reason we are here today as Christians is because in our own past others helped us to find the way to faith. In every generation since the resurrection itself, this has happened, and people has discovered the life changing truth of the good news, through the Bible and with the help of others. Then they in turn have shared it with others. Are we ready, equipped, able and willing to be part of that process? Will the church even survive if we are not?

We can stay within the walls of our buildings - and hopefully we may be back there quite soon. We can stay among our friends and let the truths of our faith wash over us as we enjoy each other's company. Or we can allow God's Spirit to lead us to those who are searching, and give us the words that may change someone else's life. We can be part of the process that has enabled the church to continue through all these long generations since the day of resurrection itself. Jesus Christ is alive, here amongst us, offering us truth, hope, joy, peace and endless love. And He is alive for all people, though many do not know him. Can we work with him to bring others to faith? Not just to add numbers to our church families. But to be part of the continuing spread of good news around this world. The choice is ours. The future is in our hands. And God is alive in our midst, speaking through the Bible, and the words of others, speaking through those who have taken his words into their hearts, and speaking directly by his Spirit into our very souls. How will you respond?

## **Prayers (Including hymn: Hallelujah)**

*Hallelujah, my Father, for giving us Your Son,  
Sending Him into the world, to be given up for men,  
Knowing we would bruise Him, and smite Him from the earth,  
Hallelujah, my Father, in His death is my birth,  
Hallelujah, my Father, in His life is my life.*

***Hallelujah, my Father, for giving us Your Son.***



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Loving God, help to grasp the truth of your love in every part of our being. Help us to understand your willingness to live amongst us, and to die for this world you love so much. Help us to really engage with your living presence in our midst, and to grow in our relationship with you. May your resurrection and your being alive now, inform all that we do, and be the guiding truth of our lives.

## ***Sending Him into the world, to be given up for men.***

Lord, you sent your Son into this world, to change it from the inside out. He, in turn, sent out his disciples, with instructions on how to live, and how to serve the needs of those around them. And you send us, your people of here and now, with instructions to listen for your voice of guidance, and to share our faith with those around us.

## ***Knowing we would bruise Him, and smite Him from the earth.***

Lord, your Son knew great suffering in his life, at the hands of those who could not grasp his truth, and who feared his message of love and hope.

We live in a world of much suffering. We live in a city of much suffering. We ourselves have suffered and have known pain and struggle and fear and uncertainty. We look to you, the suffering servant, and know that you understand and care for us in our need. And so we ask that you open our eyes to the needs around us, and lead us to those in whose lives your love and truth can make a difference. We ask you to show us how to be compassionate, gentle, considerate and above all loving as you are. May your suffering inspire us to reach through our own suffering into the suffering hurting places that others are experiencing. We pause for a moment and offer prayers for those that we know are in particular need right now.

[Silence]

## ***Hallelujah, my Father, in His death is my birth.***

Lord Jesus, you died to bring us life in all its fullness. May we live as those who know that your loving us creates new life within us. May your resurrection and your living presence inspire us to begin again in whatever way you call us.

## ***Hallelujah, my Father, in His life is my life***

Loving Lord, your new life brings us new life. We pray, bring new life to your world in the days ahead. Bring new hope, new vision and new direction to your people seeking to love and serve you in the unknown post-covid world that is opening up before us. Accept our prayers, and use up to open up new possibilities wherever we find ourselves. For we exist as your church, for your purposes. Amen





*Hallelujah, my Father, for giving us Your Son,  
Sending Him into the world, to be given up for men,  
Knowing we would bruise Him, and smite Him from the earth,  
Hallelujah, my Father, in His death is my birth,  
Hallelujah, my Father, in His life is my life.*

Have a good week everyone. Stay patient - we're nearly there! We'll be back in some kind of normality before too long. Meanwhile, pray for one another. And be open to God's Spirit leading us all forwards.

## **Hymn: Sent By the Lord Am I**

*Sent by the Lord am I; my hands are ready now  
To make the earth the place in which the kingdom comes.  
Sent by the Lord am I; my hands are ready now  
To make the earth the place in which the kingdom comes.  
The angels cannot change a world of hurt and pain  
Into a world of love, of justice and of peace,  
The task is mine to do, to set it really free.  
Oh, help me to obey; help me to do your will.*

*Sent by the Lord am I; my hands are ready now  
To make the earth the place in which the kingdom comes.  
Sent by the Lord am I; my hands are ready now  
To make the earth the place in which the kingdom comes.  
The angels cannot change a world of hurt and pain  
Into a world of love, of justice and of peace,  
The task is mine to do, to set it really free.  
Oh, help me to obey; help me to do your will.*

May God bless you in all that you are, and in all that you do in his name.  
May God bless your homes and your activities, and your inactivity.  
May God bless your families and friends - all those you love.  
And may God bless those amongst whom you live.  
May you be a blessing to others.  
In the name of Christ. Amen

CCL: 30925  
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Sent By The Lord Am I - Jose Aguiar  
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