

*May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts  
be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.*

Tonight we mark **Ascension Day**, forty days after Easter. The day is special because it marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry but this was not the end; rather it was a beginning, **a start of the work of the disciples**. It was the disciples who witnessed Jesus' Ascension who continued the work of passing on the teaching of Jesus to others. Work that continues today through new disciples. These new disciples are you and me, and disciples means followers of Christ.

However just before Jesus left them he gave his disciples instructions. Instructions and a blessing. The instructions are as relevant to us today as they were to those first disciples. The instructions Jesus gave them just before he ascended to heaven was about their **relationship with God**. A relationship which is often expressed through worship.

Once Jesus ascended to heaven the first thing that his disciples did was to **put God first**. They ignored the other demands upon their time and went back to Jerusalem from where they had just come and spent all their time in the temple praising and blessing God. Putting God first is something that we can all do today and is an important part of our relationship with Him. When we put God first our views and priorities also often change.

While the disciples put God first, they did a second thing, they spent time **praising and blessing God**. Praising and blessing God are just two aspects of our worship, two which I will come back to later.

Worshipping God does not just happen when we are in church, instead it happens every time we devote ourselves to God and our gospel reading indicates some different aspects of worship

### **Firstly, understanding the scripture.**

In our gospel reading, Jesus blessed the disciples with the understanding of the scriptures, however for most of us just reading the bible does not give us understanding of what they mean. We need to look deeper and take the time to understand them and yes, sometimes the passage can be difficult to understand and each one of us struggles with some passages. Understanding comes by reading, re-reading the passages, working out the context in which they were written, praying about them, using reference books and articles, study guides, discussing them with others or any combination of the above. If this is an area that you are struggling with, then please speak to us as there are several options available from house-groups, to bible study notes (both paper and online versions) that we can guide you to. Jesus knew that his disciples had to understand the scriptures in order to be develop our relationship with God.

## **Secondly, Repentance and forgiveness of sins.**

This is not exactly the most popular aspect of our Christian faith however, **we are all sinners** and as we often say in confession, it is by our “**thoughts, words and deeds**” that we do something, either intentionally or unintentionally that turns our lives away from God, where what we think, say and do is not how God would live, this does not mean that we have to live nice happy lives, we only need to look at the gospels to see that Jesus displayed emotions.

When we come before God, we need to spend time thinking about what we have done which we need to say **sorry** for and this is part of our preparation for worship as well as confessing them to God, either as part of the service if we are in church or privately.

Saying sorry for our sins is not just enough, we also need to **repent**; repentance is not just saying sorry but the conscious act of not wanting to do the same sin again (which is definitely easier said than done!).

When we confess our sins, repented of them, then we have the knowledge that God forgives us our sins, as John said earlier when he gave us the absolution “May the God of Love and power forgive....” These are not just words which are said but they are a statement, a statement of encouragement that we can be freed from the burden of sin and that through the Holy Spirit we can be renewed

The repentance and remission of sins is part of being a Christian and Jesus was very clear in our gospel reading that it needs to be proclaimed throughout the world, however, we tend not to focus on this aspect of our faith when we are trying to persuade people by our words and actions to become a Christian as it is not the most appealing part! Instead we tend to focus on other key aspects of our faith, for example the aspects which are highlighted in our psalm this evening. A wonderful joyful happy psalm which relates to a lot of the good things that God has done for us and the fact that God is king.

The psalm was written to celebrate God’s rule over the nations. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he was in fact returning to his Father and would take his throne over everything. As Christians we trust in Jesus’ reign over all creation and we submit to his kingly but loving rule.

As we celebrate this, our worship turns to praise and blessing, this is not two separate acts, rather one event which were the disciples response to the events that they had witnessed and some of us will have experienced other events which will have made us praise and bless God ourselves. It is a natural response to everything that God has done for us, whatever that may be.

Praising and blessing God are two actions which are joyful, however after the events in Manchester on Monday night, we are more inclined towards lament;

the sorrowful pondering of why and this is also part of our worship and relationship with God. If we know and understand the scriptures then this allows us to turn to them in times of need for example we may want to turn to psalm 94 where although written in a very different time and for a totally different situation it seems like it could have been written for this situation as verse 3 says

“Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?” (KJV)

But the psalmist then turns his cry of lament into hope and reassurance as verse 22 says

“But the Lord is my defence; and my God is the rock of my refuge.” (KJV)

It is in this part that we can dwell and be reassured, it is hope that Jesus also offers and we know that by his ascension, Jesus is preparing a place for all Christian believers.

With the aftermath of events such as this week’s terrorist attack we need to turn to another natural response is to pray, even people who are not Christians will sometimes turn to prayer when things go bad. If you have been on social media you will have seen the strapline #PrayForManchester which shows how many people are praying in bad situations.

Today marks the start of a global prayer initiative being led by the Church of England called “**Thy Kingdom Come**” and a dozen members of different churches in Sandhurst were out and about praying around the streets of Sandhurst today, several more members will be doing the same thing on Saturday. These prayer walks are a chance to **pray for our community**, and show them that prayer is for every situation, not just the bad or worrying ones. By praying and communicating with God we develop our relationship with Him and as such it helps us to **put God first** in our lives.