

TALK FOR CAREY, 1st MAY 2022, NUMB 6:22-27 & LUKE 24:45-53

BLESSED GOD, BLESSES CREATION

These are the closing words of the gospel of Luke. Like the rest of the gospels, it is a remarkably open-ended ending to a remarkable book. And uniquely with Luke, he continues to write the gospel in the book of Acts. This 'second gospel' Luke wrote shows how the first believers continued to hear Jesus. And continued the works of Jesus, as he had called them to do.

Three things. Three things from this encounter with the risen Jesus in Luke's first gospel I would like to highlight briefly here:

- Jesus opened their minds by opening his mouth and speaking to them
- Jesus led them out
- Jesus lifted up his hands and he blessed them

Surely these first disciples had already had their minds opened? But it is clear from here, and also in the book of Acts, that Jesus is always in the habit of opening people's minds. And he does this by speaking to them. Speaking words of truth and life, to show them the way.

Now, here's the thing. You may be here this morning and you don't believe in Jesus. Or it may be that you are not sure whether you believe in Jesus or not. Now I'm not here to convince you to believe in Jesus. I can't do that. It's not within my power to do that. But what I **would** like to do is to give you a challenge. When you get a moment, sometime later today or later this week, I would ask you this: Get a Bible. And read again these words from the gospel of Luke, or another short passage from any story of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. And then pray a simple prayer to the LORD, asking Jesus to open your mind to what he has said and done. I believe Jesus is uniquely gifted in opening our minds. Jesus is able to help us to see our lives, our world in a new way.

But I have another challenge also. To those of us here who do believe in Jesus. To those of you who perhaps have followed Jesus for many years. This is my challenge. Read the Bible this week and ask God to open your mind. Each of us need to repeatedly have our minds opened to God. In our journey of following Jesus, there is always the danger of us thinking we have arrived at the truth. We settle down with a settled set of beliefs. But as we see in this story of those first believers, Jesus wants to continue to lead us out and lead us on. Just as with those first disciples, so with us. Yes, you may have been baptised and

filled with God's Spirit. Praise God! But Jesus has more to show us all. As the hymn puts it, 'The LORD has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word'.

So, Jesus opens our minds by speaking to us and he leads us out and leads us on. And who knows where this journey will take us? Who knows where we will end up? But we do know that, as long as we are following Jesus, the LORD will be there with us.

I would like to share with you two good news stories from Ukraine, which I read about just this week. These are stories of two ordinary people who are being led by Jesus. The first is a Baptist leader, Pastor Sasha, who lives somewhere between Dnipro and Donestk. In other words, very much in the firing line. At a care home Sasha visits there are residents who are unable to move to the basement when the air raid warning sounds. But Sasha stays with these people, holds their hands and prays with them. When asked why he does this he says simply: 'It's what Jesus would do'.

Then there's Pastor Serhii, who lives in the Poltova region. He used to think that sharing his faith was about giving out gospel tracts in the centre of town. Now he is being led by Jesus to witness differently. Now his church, as a building and as a fellowship of people, has become a resource for the whole community. It's a place where people can now go to give blood. It's a place of refuge and of providing food for refugees from beyond the city. Gospel witness now for Serhii, is about extending hands of blessing to all in the name of Jesus. Showing the broken heart of God to a broken world.

Blessed God, blessing creation. In spite of our sin. In spite of all the darkness and evil in our world. As St Paul put it, 'Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.' Blessing upon blessing. And here I want us to pause and take a moment. Because this is what particularly blessed me about this story of the risen Jesus in Luke's gospel. It's this double emphasis on the blessing of Jesus: 'Jesus lifted up his hands and he blessed them. **While he was still blessing them**, he left them'. Jesus was so busy blessing them that he forgot the time. You might think he has got more important things on his mind right then. The journey ahead of him. But in the very act of ascending to heaven and returning to his Heavenly Father, he is still blessing.

This is why the story of Jesus and the whole Bible is good news. Because it is about God's act of blessing from start to finish. The first words of Jesus' first

sermon are taken up with a series of blessings. The last words he speaks are blessings. The first words we hear God speak in the Bible are God singing the world into being with a series of blessings. Each act of creation is completed with the blessing: 'God saw that it was good'.

Blessing. Giving love, creatively, generously and wholeheartedly. This is the heart, the very being, the primal instinct of Jesus and therefore of our God. God wants to bless all creation. Therefore God wants to bless you.

I was going to say more here about the many ways in which Jesus and we too can use our hands to bless each other and God's creation. But what I want to leave you with is this thought. The hands of Jesus, lifted up to bless his first disciples. The hands Jesus lifts up to bless us today, are hands that have big holes in them. Hands that show the imprint of ugly nails. The risen Jesus is also the Jesus who has suffered for us. And Jesus continues to suffer with us. What greater blessing can we have than this? The One who was crucified on the cross by people like me and you, is also the One who chooses to continue to live with us by his Holy Spirit. If that doesn't demonstrate his loving forgiveness towards us, I don't know what does. If you want to know how much Jesus wants to bless you, then look no further than this good news: Jesus wants to live with us and within us. Hallelujah ! Praise the LORD!

Perhaps now might be a good time for us to be quiet. To ask Jesus to open our minds. To ask God to show us how he wants to bless us, today. To show us how we want to lead us on in the days ahead. I know that Jesus wants to speak to each of us here. I know that he wants to bless you and you and you and you... Jesus is reaching out his nail-pierced hands to you right now... He wants to bless you and make you a blessing to others...

? (Just to close this time of quiet, I want to ask you: What hand signals do you imagine you are getting from God? Too often people think God is there all the time wagging his finger in displeasure. Or even giving the 'thumbs down' sign. But the good news of Jesus tells us a very different story. A story of a God who gives all of us the thumbs up. A God who lifts up scarred hands to offer us all the blessing of his love... I hope all of us have heard the voice of Jesus today. Heard him telling **you** that He loves **you**. Because He does).