

Lord Jesus Christ, speak to us words of life through the power of the Holy Spirit and help us to live Good News and give glory to your Father in heaven. Amen.

- Some words from our first reading, *'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'*
- How well do you cope with pressure? The pressure of bills to pay? The pressure of things you've got to get done? The pressure of people relying on you for something to happen? The pressure of your own self-esteem and expectations; 'I didn't get it right last time, I really want it to go well this time'? The pressure of expectations from your manager at work? Or simply the everyday pressure of daily life, the unremitting grind? How do you cope with all that?
- The beginning of our Gospel reading made me think about the pressure of life, and perhaps especially the pressures we put ourselves under as I thought of Jesus coming back from the hilly wilderness where he'd been busy recharging his batteries and choosing his first disciples. As he came back into society again the news spread and he got mobbed by a large crowd, each calling for his attention, his healing touch, his words of wisdom, his leadership in the struggle against the Romans.
- How did he decide what to say to them? Did he prepare it? Was it part of a grand plan? Or did he just say the first things that his Father put into his head?
 - I know that if I had been in that situation, I would have had an outline plan and probably spent several hours working out what I wanted to happen. I'd have written it down. But laptops, let alone paper and biro were not common in Jesus's day and he must have had to keep it all in his head.
 - That must have been some pressure!
- We hear that he healed all those who needed healing. Did that give him some time to compose his thoughts, to identify with the needy, clamouring, desperate people around him? Or did it just pile on the pressure more?
- So *'Then he looked up at his disciples and'* you get the impression that he loved them, a great wave of compassion flooded through him as he gave them some Good News. He saw the pressures they were under, the daily unremitting grind of staying alive in poverty stricken, enemy occupied Galilee, and he offered them hope as he looked at them smiled and said, 'You're poor. Anyone can see that you're poor. Just look at your ragged clothing, your emaciated bodies, the disease ridden limbs of the people I've healed. But *'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.'*
 - But what right did he have to say this to them? Are these not merely empty words, designed to make them feel better but with no substance in truth?
 - A bit like when someone is offloading onto us their pressures and problems, and before we can stop ourselves we say, 'Never mind. I'm sure it will all be all right in the end.' Have you ever done that? Well the fact is, it might not be! And is Jesus mouthing the same empty platitudes?
- Some words from our first reading, *'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.'*
- And Jesus hasn't finished there. He starts talking about the people's oppressors. The rich landowners. The moneylenders. The Romans. The Sadducees and Pharisees and priests in the temple laying unbearable burdens on them. And the news isn't quite so Good.
 - *'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.'*
 - That smacks of preaching revolution to me.
 - But on what basis? How can Jesus just utter these empty words when he has no intention of starting a revolution? At least not a violent socially upheaving one.
- Some words from our first reading, *'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'*
- And perhaps that is the answer! 1 Corinthians 15 provides the basis for confidence in Jesus' words.

- Christ has been raised from the dead. Our faith is not in vain
- There is no problem too great that it cannot be redeemed by the miraculous saving work of Jesus Christ.
- St Paul knows Jesus is alive because he has seen him, on the road to Damascus. Death was not the end for Jesus. There can be no problem as insoluble as death. And Jesus has beaten it.
- He is alive and kicking and living in the new Kingdom of God where there is no more poverty, no more inequality, no more weeping and no more hunger. All these false things have been taken away and one day we will be living in the world which God wants us to live in.
 - But if the rich and the well fed and the self-indulgent insist on living by the values which they have at the moment instead of God's Kingdom values then they won't fit in this new kingdom and who knows where they will be then? Jesus doesn't say! He just says 'woe'!
- And if Christ had not been raised none of this will be true and our faith, our hopes, Jesus' words would all be in vain! One day, ..., one day, it will all be sorted out! Our pressures will be completely removed and life will be real life, wonderful life once again.
- The most amazing thing about being part of the Church, the body of Christ is that we are able to see glimpses of this new Kingdom in the imperfect, stressful, pressure filled world in which we live today.
- Some words from our first reading, *'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'*
 - But we know he is! He is here amongst us.
 - Sometimes this helps us get our priorities in the right order and realise that some of the pressures we worry about are not that important after all.
 - ~And sometimes that gives us a mission to remove the inequality we see all around us, feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick, comfort the bereaved and bring a sense of present hope to them all. A hope that is based on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The living victorious Christ.
 - Sometimes this gives us a security and companionship in our pressures and our problems. Jesus sharing the grotty bits with us, as he shared our life and as he shared the suffering of the world on the cross.
 - And sometimes this gives us the reassurance that Christ has overcome the evil injustices of the world, as he overcome the power of evil on the cross.
- But always, with faith in the risen Christ, we have a meaning to life, a direction to follow and a hope that is based on reality not pipedreams or mere empty words. And that helps put the pressures into perspective.
- Here at St Mary's we are incredibly blessed to be a fellowship of people who clearly live their lives in this way. Who are not afraid to get their hands dirty in the mess of life as Jesus got his hands dirty. Who are not cowed by the priorities of the world but keen to live generously and ensure that the Church is able to follow where we believe God is calling. Who are living a resurrection faith based on the hope of the living Jesus Christ whom we meet week by week in prayer and worship.
- We strive as a Church to live just as generously as our individual members. Not to waste money but to use it for the glory of God and the furtherance of his Kingdom, here on earth, today.
- Are we rich or are we poor. Are we blessed or are we full of woe?
 - Well I don't know about you, but I feel blessed to be part of St Mary's and decidedly hopeful for the future. I don't want to be part of a rich church but I do want to be part of a Church that makes a difference to the community locally and globally of which we are part. And I can see signs of that in St Mary's. So we are poor and blessed!
- Each of you here today will have a letter asking you to consider how your generosity can help us to continue doing the same thing. At the moment we have a shortfall of about £3 000. If each of our financial supporters each gave an extra £1 a week we would easily close the gap. And then resurrection would be that much more real for us today!
- Some words from our first reading, *'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'*
- Are you going to be part of the healing miracle? Are you rich or are you poor? Are you blessed or full of woe? The choice is yours!