Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We usually gather for worship at St Georges Rd. Today though, and for the foreseeable future, we are gathering for worship in front of our TVs and computers. But the day that we gather for worship is Sunday – the first day of the week. And we do this because the Fourth Commandment requires us to observe the Sabbath Day. Many of you will know, though, that the Sabbath of the Old Testament was the seventh day of the week – Saturday. And of course, there are some professing Christians today who believe that we should still be gathering for worship on Saturday, not Sunday. And this is surely something that most if not all of us have thought about at one time or another. So why do we believe that the NT Sabbath is Sunday?

And I actually had a phone call a few months back from a woman who asked me this exact question. She had spoken to several ministers because she could not understand why so many Christians worship on Sunday when the Fourth Commandment has Saturday in view. And after I had listened to her explain her view, I began my response by saying that it is not a question that can be answered with one or two verses that add up to Thou Shalt Now Worship on Sunday; I said it is a whole Bible, story of salvation, Christ is the Centre, theological thing.

And I believe that our text today is a really good example of this. It is a record of the first time that Jesus appeared to His disciples after He had risen. It is part of how John is demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But **this meeting between the Risen Lord and His Church has a Lot to Say about Sunday**. And we are going to unpack this theme as we take note of five *new* things: A New **Institution**, a New **Blessing**, a New **Commission**, a New **Power**, and a New **Message**. And we will end by noting why all this adds up to Sunday being the day for gathered Christian worship.

1. So we begin with the new **institution**. And here we see why this is a meeting between the risen Lord *and His church*.
   1. When we looked at v18 last time, we noted that when Jesus told Mary to go to His brothers and tell them the words recorded there, that was the first time that Jesus spoke about His followers as His **brothers**. Before then He had called them His disciples and His friends but now He was calling them His brothers. And this new and intimate family name had to do with the fact that Jesus had died and risen again. From this day forward, those who believed in Jesus were now His brothers and sisters, who, with Jesus, had God as their? Father. So the group in this room were the new institution – the family of God; the brothers and sisters of Jesus.
      1. And I very deliberately refer to them as a group, and as brothers *and sisters*, because while those there that evening obviously included the 11 remaining disciples, if you look back at v18, you will see that **Mary Magdalene** “went and announced to the disciples” that she had seen the risen Lord. And in Luke’s Gospel, we are told Jesus appeared to a **group of women** and that they all went to the disciples to tell them about their meeting with the risen Jesus. Luke also tells us that after **Cleopas and his friend** recognized Jesus earlier in the day, they ran back to Jerusalem and told “the eleven and those gathered with them” about their meeting with the risen Jesus. And Luke says, “*As they were talking about these things, Jesus Himself stood among them.*” And that is when this conversation that we read about here in John took place. OK? So this group was not just the 11 disciples but also a group of women and some other men.
      2. In fact, sometime later, we read in Acts 1 about another gathering in an upper room in Jerusalem where a group of **120 people**, including the 11 disciples, some women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers, “*were devoting themselves to prayer.*”
      3. So this small group here in John 20 really is the beginning of the NT church of Jesus Christ. And the 11 disciples were the prototype office-bearers of this congregation. And we will see why it is important to know this later on.
2. But let’s look, in the second place, at the New **Blessing**. Two times in this short passage, the Lord Jesus says to the church, “*Peace be with you*.” We see it in v19 and again in v21: “*Peace be with you*.”
   1. Now, in one sense, there was **nothing new** about this greeting. This had already been the way that God’s people had greeted each other for centuries. Do you know who the first person is to make this greeting in the Bible? It was actually **Joseph** in Egypt. He said it to his brothers at one time, “*Peace to you*.” The Hebrew word is *Shalom*. And it means May the Lord prosper you in every way. It is still used today and it is a very beautiful greeting that sure beats, Hi or Wot up? ☺ So in one way this would have been a very familiar greeting to those gathered in that room.
   2. But this was also something **very new**. Turn back a few pages to **John 14:27**. There, before the cross, Jesus was trying to prepare His disciples for what was about to happen. And note what He said, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you*.” So what Jesus was about to do would give His disciples peace in a way that was different than how the world gave it. And so now, on the other side of the cross, what are Jesus’ first words to the church? Peace. And it wasn’t, May the Lord prosper you in every way, which is what everyone wished for the other; it was something much more essential and profound. In **Romans 5:1** we read, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*.” Peace with God.
      1. Boys and girls, what is the opposite of peace? War/hostility/hatred/apartness. Right now you are stuck at home for at least 4 weeks – peace or war!
      2. So this is the message of the gospel – the natural state of a human being is war with God. And if you’re not a believer, you might be thinking to yourself, I am not at war with God! I don’t even care about God! But the Bible is crystal clear, you are either for God or against Him; you are either at war with God or you have peace with God. And the whole point of John’s Gospel is to tell us that God sent His Son to secure the peace we need on the cross. And that is what Jesus announces here to the church – Peace be with you. I have given you peace with God.
      3. So to be a Christian is to have peace with God. That is what Jesus announces here; that is the significance of this new blessing. And the rest of the NT basically holds peace with God up to the light, like a diamond, and explores its many facets.
3. So peace with God is the new blessing that Jesus announced to the church in that room. But the church wasn’t to just enjoy this peace among themselves. And that is what we see thirdly as we turn our attention to the New **Commission** that Jesus gave to the church.
   1. And a commission is a task or an official duty. Boys and girls, if Mum says to you that you have to go to your brother or sister and tell them to come for dinner, that is a commission. She has given you an official duty; that is what you have to do. Well, in the second half of v21, we see the church’s commission: Jesus said, “*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you*.” And what’s the key word in this commission? Sent/send.
      1. It started with the Father and the Son in heaven. Up there they enjoyed the glory of divinity and intimate fellowship. But down here on earth humanity was lost in its sin and guilt and misery. So the Father sent the Son to earth and the Son willingly gave up His position in heaven to live on earth as a human being and to die on the cross. And in so doing He *secured* peace so that all who believe and repent might become His brothers and sisters. So our salvation begins with this sending – the sending of the Son by the Father.
      2. And that becomes the pattern for the church. We see it in this commission, “*So I am sending you*,” and how it is expressed in the other Gospels: The most well known one is **Matthew 28:19**, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…*” **Mark 16:15**, “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation*.” **Luke 24:46-**47, “*Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations*.” The church is to be a *going* church, a *sent* church. **As the Father sent the Son, so we are to send**.
      3. What does this mean?
         1. Well, this is why we noted earlier that this group here is the church, made up of members and office-bearers.
         2. So in general terms, the responsibility of everyone there that day was to go/to be sent; what they had heard from Jesus they had to go and tell others. And it is the same with us today; we may not hear about Christ and all His blessings on Sunday and keep it to ourselves; we have to go and tell others.
         3. But the disciples/office-bearers had to go/be sent to all nations. And this is the story of the Book of Acts isn’t it. They became missionaries to the world. And this remains a key task of Christ’s office-bearers today – teach and equip people to go/send them. Train ministers and missionaries, plant churches, support overseas missions.
         4. BC. Church plant. How about you? Ordained mission? Mission support? Go. Share the gospel.
4. And to aid the church in her new commission, the Lord Jesus provided her with a New **Power**, our fourth point. In v22 we read, “*And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*” So the new power for this sending church is the Holy Spirit.
   1. And this should not surprise us at all because this is what Jesus repeatedly promised in chapters 14-16. Again and again, He said that the Father would send another helper – the Holy Spirit. You see, it is the Holy Spirit who *converts* people. It is the Holy Spirit who *teaches* us all things. It is the Holy Spirit who *convicts* people of sin. It is the Holy Spirit who *gives us Christ and all His blessings*. It is the Holy Spirit who *makes us more and more like Jesus*. The power of the church is the Holy Spirit.
   2. And just briefly, Bible scholars spend pages and pages trying to work out how this breathing out of the Spirit on the disciples relates to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which was 50 days later. Was this just symbolic? Was this partial and just a foretaste? But we need not make this some huge problem. Jesus had promised to give them the Holy Spirit, and that is what He did here. 50 days later, in a much more public setting, the Spirit descended upon them like divided tongues of fire and with the sound of a rushing wind, and they begin speaking in tongues. And the crowd at the temple were amazed and astonished by what they saw and heard from the disciples. So there was this first, private, breathing out of the Holy Spirit, and 50 days later there was a public outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And this does not mean that the Spirit left the believers after this event and came to them again at Pentecost. This was a unique time in church history and these two events are about private and public and filling and gifting.
      1. In **1 Corinthians 12** we read, “*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit … All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills*.”
   3. And the key take home for you and me is that same Spirit who helped believers to fulfill their commission then is the same Spirit who helps us fulfill our commission today!
5. And that brings us, fifthly, to the New **Message**.And we see this in **v23**, “*If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld*.”
   1. I hope that if I were to ask you who can forgive your sins? your answer would be quick and simple – God. Right? In **1 John 1:9** we read, “*If we confess our sins, He [that is God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*.” So God and God alone forgives our sin. But here Jesus said, “*If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld*.” So what was He saying? Did the 11 disciples now have the power to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness? Can you and I forgive each other’s sins?
      1. Well, in **general**, Jesus was announcing the message that the church preaches, which is the forgiveness of sins. Whether it be from the pulpit or when we are out there with others, what we need to tell them is that they need their sins forgiven. Jesus did not come to make us rich or successful or healthy or happily married; He came that we might have our sins forgiven; He came that we might have peace with God. And that is what lost sinners need to hear. My friend, whatever it is that you have done and that weighs so heavily on your conscience will be forgiven by God if you look to Jesus and believe that He died on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. If you do that today – if you believe and confess and devote yourself to following Jesus, your heavy burden will disappear! So in general, the words of v23 are the message that the church preaches – the forgiveness of sins.
      2. But there were also **office-bearers** present in that room that day. And fifty days later Peter preached the Pentecost Day sermon and those listening said, “*What shall we do?*” And Peter replied, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*.” And then we read, “*So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls*.”
         1. So the office-bearers of the early church preached the forgiveness of sins and then received 3000 into **membership** of the church. That’s what forgiving the sins of any is about – being received into the church by baptism. But later in the epistles we learn about **excommunication**, which is where unrepentant sinners are removed from membership in the church of Christ. And that is what withholding forgiveness has in view.
         2. So there is an official church aspect here in v23 also – through her office-bearers, the church receives forgiven sinners into the church and it excommunicates unrepentant sinners.
         3. But note that the idea here is not We office-bearers allow someone to join the church so God now adds them to His list in heaven, or we excommunicate someone and God now scrubs them from His list in heaven. No no!
         4. Most English Bible versions don’t help us get the sense of the Greek language very well with this verse. The NASB is the best. It says, “*If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you withhold the sins of any, they have been withheld*.” What office-bearers do down here recognizes what God has already declared in heaven. Do you follow that? God says, whoever believes in my Son becomes my child. So we welcome that person into the church. God’s declaration comes first and is then acted on by His office-bearers.

So, the new ***institution*** is the church, the new ***blessing*** is peace with God, the new ***commission*** is to go, the new ***power*** is the Holy Spirit, and the new ***message*** is the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. And at the absolute centre of all this newness is? The person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ – It is *His* church, it is *He* that secures our peace, it is *He* that we are to imitate as we are sent, it is *His Spirit* that empowers us for our task, and *He* is the message we proclaim to others!

So all that remains is to note six words in the text that we have not yet mentioned; and they are the words in v19 that tell us when this meeting took place: “***The first day of the week****.*” Jesus rose on Sunday. And His first meeting with the church took place on Sunday. The new *blessing*, the new *commission*, the new *power*, and the new *message* were given to the church on Sunday. And guess what day it was when the Holy Spirit was poured out in the very public and visible way and 3000 were added to the church? Sunday. And all of this is why Sunday is called, in **Revelation 1:10**, the “Lord’s Day.” And it’s also why we read, in **Acts 20:7**, that the church was “*gathered together to break bread*” on the first day of the week. Do you see what I meant when I said that Sunday as the NT Sabbath is a whole Bible, story of salvation, Christ is the Centre, theological thing? With this meeting, Jesus reset the Sabbath calendar. And it is right that we gather for worship on Sunday. Amen.