

Telephone Service

Low Sunday

Sunday 11th April

John 20.19-31

TOGETHER IN FAITH

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It's often been said that if you were setting out to found a movement to change the world, you wouldn't look to recruit the 12 disciples of Jesus, with all their shortcomings. But of course Jesus knew exactly what he was doing as was understood very well by the gospel writers who have passed their stories down to us. We need Peter who was so prone to opening his mouth and sticking his foot right in it and who was overcome by such fear that he denied all knowledge of Jesus when the chips were down. We need James and John who were so ambitious as to want the promise of favoured places in heaven. Perhaps we even need Judas with all his failing. We certainly need Thomas, whose questioning struggle we read about today. We need them because in them, we can see ourselves and our weaknesses and needs.

To understand Thomas, we have to step back into the atmosphere of that first Easter Day. We see Easter as a time of rejoicing and celebration and rightly so, but we have the advantage of knowing what happened next; in New Testament times, in 2000 years of Christian tradition and in our own experience. That gives context to our understanding of Easter. It was quite different on the day itself. The disciples had experienced deep sorrow at the death of their friend, utter horror at the manner of his death, unspeakable anger at the religious authorities and the mob they had incited to buy for his blood, hatred and blame towards Judas who had betrayed him and agonising shame for their own desertion. All their hopes had been dashed. Their world had fallen apart. Then into that unimaginable cauldron of emotion is added the incredible news that Jesus has risen from the dead. Can they dare to believe it?

Evening finds them all together with doors locked for fear that they would be next, but supporting one another, sharing their pain and confusion and wondering. That's how Jesus finds them. But Thomas is not with them. Does this mean simply that he was elsewhere, with other things to do, other places to be? Perhaps it does. I hesitate to read between the lines, but words are chosen

carefully in the gospels. John doesn't say that 'he wasn't there' but that 'Thomas was not with them when Jesus came.' This suggests to me that he had separated himself from the group. We can imagine him keeping his distance, perhaps wanting space in which to deal with his emotions. But then they come along and tell him, 'we have seen the Lord.' Now he's even more at odds with them, not having the experience with them. No wonder he reacts with questioning doubt. I suspect that many of us would do the same. And in doing so, Thomas is expressing our questions too.

The following week, back with the group, Thomas sees Jesus for himself and, it seems, doesn't even have to touch the wounds of the crucifixion as he had said he would, before declaring his faith in the words, 'My Lord and my God.' He recognises Jesus not just as his friend and teacher returned to life, but as risen Christ and Son of God. All doubts have been dispelled in that moment of encounter.

It might seem a little harsh of Jesus to respond as he does, but his words are given as blessing and encouragement to the first readers of the early Church and to us today. 'Blessed are those who have not seen for themselves but have come to believe.' The leap of faith for Thomas and the other disciples was to believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Son of God. The leap of faith for everyone who has come since is to believe in the risen Christ, not known by sight but by the testimony of others and each person's own inner experience.

Such faith lies somewhere between doubt and certainty and perhaps develops more from the former than the latter. Faith is not certainty. If something can be explained and proved, it needs no faith to believe, just knowledge. Faith means living with uncertainty, with loose ends, with mystery. If we try to tie up the things of God into nice neat bundles and explain the whole of Scripture, always a temptation in a world that seeks to understand everything, we do God and our fellow humans a great disservice. Faith is a relationship of trust.

Our faith is not something absolute and unchanging. It takes time to grow and then, however strong it appears, we all have times of wavering, of questioning, of

struggling to square what we believe with what we experience ourselves and what we see in the world around us. Then we need compassionate and steadfast friends, who will not tell us what we should believe or make us feel guilty that we don't, but just to be alongside, allowing us to express our doubts and concerns with honesty and not afraid to share their own. The faith of the Church is not just the proclamations tied up in the creeds that we pray each Sunday but the wonderings and wanderings we share as a community of love.

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with a friend and colleague about the popular saying that 'God does not send you any trials that you can't cope with.' That thought might bring strength and encouragement to some, but what about the times when we feel quite overwhelmed by life or see others experiencing suffering that is quite clearly bringing them to breaking point.....is faith just not strong enough? Has God abandoned them? Then we thought of another saying that 'when you are too weak to pray, that's the time for others to pray on your behalf.' We talked about that being extended beyond prayer to faith and hope. When one person's spiritual resources run dry, the community steps in to make up the difference. Then God does not send any challenges or trials that the Christian community cannot cope with.

That would chime with a suggestion that we should be praying in the Lord's Prayer, not for the coming of God's kingdom, with all its connotations of top down power, but for the coming of God's kin-dom, a place of solidarity and mutual care; of true fraternity, in a gender-neutral use of the term. That's the meaning of the peace with which Jesus greets his disciples on the first Easter evening, just as he had spoken to them in his farewell discourse at the Last Supper, when he said; 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.' (John 14.27)

It is the meaning of his last commandment to them;
'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13. 34-35)

A community of shared faith, enduring hope and mutual love. That is the model of church given to us by Jesus and found in the early chapters of Acts. From the reading given for today:

'The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no-one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.' (Acts 4.32-33)

It's an ideal that can so easily be lost in the midst of organizational concerns and human failings. We soon read even in Acts of the early church being divided by squabbles, but as we celebrate Easter, the central point of our faith, and begin to return to communal worship, we would do well to remind ourselves of what church is really all about and pray for the strength to grow together towards that ideal.

To finish, I'd like to share a prayer composed by Stephen Cherry, the priest and writer who shared the notion of God's kin-dom. This is written in the first person, but for today, I shall pray it for all of us. It's called a 'Prayer for Many Gifts.'

Give us, O Lord,
a calm soul and a clear head,
a broad mind and a generous spirit.
Give us,
a warm heart and a listening ear,
our true voice and a gentle touch.
Give us,
a hunger for justice and a thirst for peace,
a passion for truth and a love of mercy.
Give us,
a painter's eye and a poet's tongue,
a saint's patience and a prophet's hope.
Give us,
a sage's wisdom and a fool's delight,
a pilgrim's purpose and an angel's content.

Amen

