

A Low Sunday?

A Sermon preached for the Diocese of Guildford on Easter 2, Sunday 11th April 2021
by Bishop Jo, Bishop of Dorking

John 20:19-31

It's 'low Sunday', the Sunday after Easter. Traditionally that refers to church attendance: presumably people exhausted their religious energy last week such that they can't make it to worship today. It's probably an apt description for clergy just now, having excelled themselves over the past week (not to mention the past year). I'd like to hope that this sermon here on Youtube allows many of them to take a well-earned break this weekend.

But what if 'low Sunday' is more than either of those – what if there is disappointment with Easter? Last week we proclaimed Christ is risen, triumphant over sin and death. Yet today the graves of those we love so dearly are still occupied, and the news of the past week hardly suggests sin has been eradicated from our world. But our own hearts and homes and workplaces tell us that - abundant evidence that sin has hardly been loosened in its grip since last Sunday. For any one of us, perhaps especially in covid times, there's a huge gap between the Easter proclamation of joy and the felt reality of grief, guilt, and hopelessness – a gap that threatens our fragile faith.

Thomas is stuck in that gap. He *wasn't there* when the risen Jesus appeared to the other disciples, he missed out. He was off somewhere else, on his own, when Jesus showed up in that locked room. Even though he's heard Jesus is alive, he's not buying it. Disappointed, heartbroken by the death of his Lord, Thomas now just wants to get on with his life. We may dub him 'Doubting Thomas' but notice what John calls him – three times - 'Thomas the Twin' – even though, if he has a sibling, we never hear anything about them. But in John's gospel no words are accidental: I wonder if his point is that Thomas is our twin, embedded within the story of Jesus' resurrection? As our identical sibling, he's articulating our disappointment and doubt that anything has changed, absolutely and forever, with Jesus' death on the cross.

The point at which Thomas finally comes to believe is when Jesus urges him, 'Come on, put your hand into my side'. And the instant Thomas touches the raw wound, he blurts out, 'My Lord and my God'. That moment is so vivid, but

listen to what Jesus says next: 'Because you have seen me you believe? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (20:29). I pick up some impatience in Jesus' voice, as though he were saying to Thomas and all subsequent doubters, ourselves included, 'Look, I won't continue to do this. There's a better way to learn to believe than sticking your hand in my side. There's a better way to know the truth of the resurrection'

Jesus had already shown his disciples that better way, when he breathed into them the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathed the Spirit into them – just as God once breathed life into Adam's nostrils. So this is a second creation story, along with the words 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them' (20:23). Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is granting humans a power that previously belonged to God alone: the power to unlock the death-grip that our sins have on our souls, to erase them from the cosmos. The power to forgive sins is the mark of a new creation, of a profoundly changed life, not just for this small group of disciples but potentially for humankind altogether.

Now how does that work? Think for a moment about the old creation story in Genesis. Already in Eden, human lives came to be governed by shame and blame, anger and fear; the man turned against the woman, the woman turned against the snake, and all of them turned away from God. But now the risen Jesus comes to the disciples when they are locked away in fear of their enemies, and offers them a completely new version of the human story, where forgiveness and freedom in the Spirit replace bitterness and blame. Jesus comes to that fearful community, tottering on the verge of collapse, and he breathes into it the Spirit that does not condemn, the Spirit of God that works in and through us for peace and wholeness. The disciples are to carry that Spirit out into the world: 'As the Father sent me, so I send you... Whenever you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them' (20:21, 23). The forgiveness of sins is the foundational mission of the church, as John conceives it. This is how we, Jesus's disciples, are to practice resurrection, the new life that began with the victory on the cross. Practicing the forgiveness of sins is practicing resurrection; that is how we may come to believe that, in the crucified and risen Lord, everything has changed.

This isn't about clergy delivering the Absolution: practicing forgiveness is for all of us. But not easy. When we've suffered in some way at the hands of others – and who has not – we tend to become deeply sensitised to our own struggle

and powerlessness and conversely also to our opponent's power and seeming prosperity. They're ok and I'm not ok. The injustice tilts our whole world, such that we fear a tipping point if that debt is not repaid – unless and until we realise what the cross is all about: Jesus paying off all our debts, both those we owe and those we are owed.

Even then let's not pretend it's easy, because sin leaves behind a depth of pain and wrongdoing. We need the Holy Spirit within us, giving us strength to go all the way down, exposing our wound to Christ, to the place where healing is found. Bringing us to point where we invite Jesus to lay a healing finger on our areas of greatest vulnerability. That takes work; it may take help; it's rarely instantaneous. One step at a time we tread – but discovering a capacity to forgive far beyond what we alone could ever manage or imagine.

But Thomas refuses to believe there can be life beyond his loss. He seems to want to believe, and yet he's tied to his pain and disappointment, and deeply defended. And so he seeks to thrust his hand into Jesus's gaping wound, he longs for Jesus' vulnerability, not realising that he's got the learning process the wrong way round. Asking for another's vulnerability is the easy bit; it is much harder and yet more hopeful to do the opposite: to expose our wounds to Christ. To open ourselves up to the probing touch of God's Holy Spirit and ask for healing.

'Shalom' says Jesus to his disciples. 'Receive the Holy Spirit', the Spirit of shalom, of wholeness and peace. God's Spirit within us frees us from the fear that there is no bottom to our loss, that the hole in our lives can never ever be filled. That frees us from all our vain attempts to fill the emptiness with other stuff – with sex or status or something – anything that might plug the hole that finally only God's love can heal.

As Nelson Mandela reminded us, it is a long walk to freedom. Forgiveness is not so much a feeling as it is work – sometimes the work of years. In every case it challenges our natural feelings, and especially our instinct for justice. When I'm suffering, I want the one who has hurt me to suffer. Measure for measure, a life for a life.

That's called retributive justice. That's the system our courts employ, and on the whole we're grateful that they do. But that kind of justice needs to be recognised for what it is: a zero sum game. It assumes every loss is final and permanent. While the gospel offers a vision and mandate for an altogether

different kind of justice: restorative justice. This assumes that the God who triumphs over death is powerful to heal every wound, to grant new life even where we can see only death and destruction. That's the justice of the resurrection, of the new creation in the risen Christ.

So Jesus comes to his disciples when they're locked away, doubtless embittered as well as fearful, and shows them they have a *choice* about what kind of justice they will seek. 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. Forgiving the sins of others – that is restorative justice. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we, the disciples of Jesus, are invited to put our best energies and creativity into the slow work of opening a space in our personal lives, our families, and our communities for God's work of bringing life out of death, reconciliation out of alienation. *Or* we can choose to retain sins, seeking not erasure but punishment, not embrace but exclusion. Which kind of justice do you wish for? In any given instance, the choice is ours.

The very first work that the risen Christ assigns his disciples is the forgiveness of sins. They're hiding in fear, fear from their religious identity, and Jesus calls them to set that fear aside and go out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's a challenging mission for sure, but it is given as a gift. It's through the work of forgiveness – the experience of being forgiven AND the experience of offering forgiveness – that we will come to grasp the resurrection, that we will realise its power, that we will find evidence of the new creation. And that through believing we will have life in Jesus' name. And others may find that life too.

I urge you – I exhort you – to risk it! In the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.