

Sunday 19th April, 2nd Sunday of Easter – Jesus appears to the disciples & to Thomas..

Acts 2: 14a, 22 – 32 John 14: 19 – 31

As we try to negotiate these strange and bewildering times, and watch what the scientists are saying about the present pandemic, it would very easy to slip into pessimism and to lose hope. Yet, even in the most difficult of situations, because of Jesus' presence, there *is always* hope! A favourite poem of mine – by Sheena Pugh – speaks about hopefulness:

Sometimes

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.
A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they are born for.
Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

[Sheenagh Pugh, 'The Poetry Cure' (Eds: Julia Darling and Cynthia Faber)]

How *do* we cope with calamity? How are we managing this present reality, in this enforced isolation, and finding ourselves suddenly without the usual means of support? Although we are all just a phone call away, it's easy, isn't it, to begin to feel sorry for ourselves, and to imagine that we're simply on our own? In actuality, though, that Jesus is still with us through every moment of our existence – and has promised that he will neither leave nor forsake us. Mercifully, for most of us, life isn't just an unremitting series of calamities, and, wonderfully, 'The sun *will* sometimes melt a field of sorrow that seemed hard frozen'... - meaning that we *will* eventually emerge on the other side, ready to fight another day.

Or, as the Queen put it recently, 'We will meet again'. And as Jeremiah the prophet wrote reassuringly, nearly 3000 years ago: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is his faithfulness'.

As the remaining 11 Apostles wait, fearfully, in a locked room – expecting any minute to be arrested and summarily executed, simply for being Jesus' followers – out of the blue they experience a dramatic reversal. Jesus is suddenly there, reassuring them – urging them to accept his peace (his *Shalom*), and breathing the Holy Spirit on them all. He's also instructing them to take up their commission as his official co-workers, with ultimate authority either to forgive sins or not. It's all rather bewildering. One moment there's little but doom and gloom in the air, and the next, they're euphorically happy – suddenly in the presence again of the one person who had given their lives ultimate purpose and meaning. No-one questions that fact that Jesus seems to be able to walk through walls or locked doors – maybe in his renewed, resurrected body he is more permanent than any physical barrier? But the point is that it's *Jesus* who is here with them – and when Jesus is there, nothing else can terrify them.

I wonder what the apostles were doing during the *next* few days, as the reality of Jesus' resurrection gradually sank in? Thomas, who for some reason wasn't with them on that first Sunday, was adamant that he needed physical proof before he was willing to believe. He's clearly a rational thinker, not given to flights of fantasy, and needs to *understand* before he can take the next step into personal belief. There may be folk like that here today.. Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas for his scepticism, but when he appears the following Sunday, his first words (apart from *Shalom*) are directed towards Thomas: 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.' And Thomas is astounded. How could Jesus know? The other disciples couldn't possibly have told him, as they hadn't seen him since that first encounter on Easter Day. Thomas is suddenly aware that he is indeed in the presence of God himself – that Jesus is indeed the Son of the Most High God, as he's been trying to show them for the last three years – and he blurts out his immortal words of confession: 'My Lord and my God!'

Interestingly, rather than words of encouragement, like, ‘Thank goodness, Thomas! You’re finally on board! Welcome to the team!’ Thomas hears Jesus say: ‘Have you believed because you have *seen* me? Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe’. I guess those words are deliberately recorded for the billions of people who will read John’s account in the years to come – most of whom will come into that category. Jesus is expecting that people who hear of him or read about him will simply exercise faith, as they choose to take a personal step of commitment to him. John himself concludes the passage with these words: ‘Now Jesus did *many* other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But *these* are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus *is* the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’

So where do we find ourselves this morning? Are we still struggling, like Thomas, in a quest to find sufficient evidence on which to base our faith? If that’s the case, when did we last take a long, hard look at Jesus? Have we ever asked him really to reveal himself to us? Thomas, when finally confronted with the evidence, had no option but to believe - and it changed his life forever. He took the gospel as far as South India, where the *Mar Thoma* church claims him as their founder, and was eventually martyred for his faith, rather than denying his Lord. When we actually come face to face with Jesus, whether it’s through our reading of the Bible, through our prayers, through a moving address, or simply when watching a beautiful rainbow, what will *our* response be? Maybe, ‘My Lord and my God’, will be the most appropriate phrase for us as well? When we do that, Jesus promises to come into our lives in a new and dynamic way – in a way that is utterly life-changing. It’s like the melting of the frozen field, or the frozen land (for the Narnia fans), with the long-anticipated arrival of spring. At the start of his gospel, John proclaims that ‘..to *all* who receive Jesus, who believe in his Name, he gave power to become children of God..’ What a wonderful promise!

At the Last Supper, Jesus had promised the disciples that they would receive the Holy Spirit, who would teach them everything, and remind them of all that Jesus had said to them. He then went on to say, ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your

hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid'. Jesus' most precious gift to us is the Holy Spirit, who comes to live within us as we come to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus doesn't promise to take the challenges of life away, and make it all easy. But, as I say, He does promise to be alongside us throughout the journey of life, to grant us a deep peace, and to provide all that we need to make it through, no matter what life throws at us.

The key, though, is constantly to be nurturing our relationship with Jesus, so that it remains close and vital. Then when calamity strikes, we don't turn to him as a relative stranger, but as our oldest, dearest friend – one with whom we walk daily, whose words we recognise, and whose touch we've already experienced.

We don't know what will happen politically in Europe and around the world in the next few months, as the pandemic runs its course, and national economies fall apart. Jesus warned his first disciples not to panic over 'wars and rumours of wars', but to trust him completely – then they would find him faithful in all things.

May we also, in our own time, do just that – and discover for ourselves his great mercy, his compassion, and his enduring faithfulness towards us in *all* things. **Amen.**

Revd Andrew Cromarty, Vicar, Hipswell Parish, Diocese of Leeds