

Looking Forward – Sermon for APCM: Sunday 24 April 2022

John 20: 19-31 & Acts 5: 27-32

The Second Sunday of Easter sometimes feels like ‘the day of doubt’. The story of so-called ‘Doubting Thomas’ is recounted every year on this day. It’s important we make space to recognise that doubts and questions and uncertainty are all part of faith, but there’s much more in this passage as it explores the tension of belief and doubt, of faith and fear.

Fear is the starting point, the disciples cowering behind locked doors for fear of imminent arrest. Fear is exacerbated when an unexpected person has apparently passed straight through that locked door. Fear reaches melting point when they realise this person is a dead man walking. ‘Peace be with you,’ he says, for peace is far from them, at that moment. Peace to calm your troubled hearts. Peace to quell your raging fear. Peace to help you believe again. Peace: Do not be afraid.

Then Jesus gives them the proofs it’s him. He shows the nail-marks in his hands and the wound from the spear in his side. It’s pretty gruesome, you have to admit, but definitely him, in the flesh, not a ghost, not a spirit, not a figment of the imagination. Fear turns to joy, wonder, delight. What next? Typically, Jesus doesn’t answer any of the questions that must have been pouring out from them. What happened? How did you do it? Where did you go? How did you get in here? He moves swiftly on to giving them instructions, and it’s worth paying close attention to them.

‘As the Father has sent me,’ he says, ‘so I am sending you.’ As the Father sent Jesus, so the disciples are to go. How’s that? God the Father gave Jesus the Son authority to speak in his name, to carry out certain miracles, to reinterpret the law; but not authority to make great shows of power or lord it over others. Jesus has just shown the wounds in his hands and his side: vulnerability is his way – born vulnerable in the cow shed; vulnerable as a child refugee in Egypt; vulnerable growing up in an ordinary home; vulnerable during his ministry as an itinerant preacher; vulnerable, ultimately, in going to his death in Jerusalem. His followers are to go as he went, without a protective blanket.

But they do not go alone: Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ Those who go in his name, go with his Spirit within them, the breath of life that God breathed on the world in the beginning, and breathes anew on the Day of Pentecost; the transforming, empowering, enabling, character-changing, gift-giving Spirit of God. What does he want them to do? Go and forgive sins. With forgiveness of sins relationships are rectified, relationships both between human beings, and between human beings and God. Once sins have been forgiven, the new life of God’s kingdom breaks in.

Only now do we come to Thomas – Thomas who hadn’t been with the others and who would not believe without the evidence of his own eyes; Thomas who was willing to keep asking questions until he got the answers he needed. A week later Jesus comes specifically for him, directly quoting his own words, offering his wounded hands and side as the evidence that Thomas wanted. Finally, ‘Stop doubting and believe.’ ‘My Lord and my God,’ is Thomas’s reply. It is the most robust statement of faith in the whole of the New Testament. No one else at that moment recognised the implications, that Jesus, now raised from the dead, is indeed God – the God of Israel, the God of the world, and, individually, my God. Thomas, in the end, is not the patron saint of doubters, but the greatest exemplar of belief.

Doubt has been a theme of the past two years – not necessarily doubts of the big issues of faith, but doubts about whether or how we would come out of the pandemic, whether lockdown would ever end, and what sort of future there will be. And now, when we look at the state of the world, it’s easy to return to a mentality of doom and gloom. Cost of living crisis, climate crisis, refugee crisis – all threaten to overwhelm us. It’s so easy for doubt and fear to return and prevail.

At a church level, questions of future viability do keep returning: numbers are not back to pre-pandemic levels; the age-profile does not suggest long-term viability; expenditure across the parish has significantly out-done income; finding the personnel to fill roles and duties becomes ever-more challenging. It would be easy to lock ourselves in our rooms (or churches) and say 'we're not coming out; the world is too frightening.'

I find it significant that Thomas was not with the others when Jesus first appeared. He was isolated from them. Doubt can lead to dismay, depression and despair when we're on our own. The mental health difficulties created by extended periods of isolation have been well-documented. We sit and brood. Faith finds it hard to secure a footing. That's why, as a parish, we have prioritised connectedness. There is the modern connectedness of worship accessed at home – and that's an important development for today's world. But in-person worship gives closer connection and fellowship and so we have always tried to move as quickly as we safely can in restoring services and opportunities for reconnect again, whether coffee after the service, Place of Welcome, Mothers' Union or Fellowship. We continue to do so, looking forward. The joint social committee of the two churches has focussed in their planning on events that allow for mixing, so that we rebuild that vital sense of connectedness. At Good Shepherd, we are moving again on long-spoken of projects – renewed sound system, properly installed projection, new seating and improved lighting, so that the infrastructure we have is fit for purpose – for people coming together – in today's world.

What else can we do? In terms of the bit crises, we won't change the world, but can we make some difference? Whilst we must take issues of our own finances seriously, we need to keep raise our eyes to helping others deal with cost-of-living issues. Whilst we can't stop the war in Ukraine (although we can and do pray daily for it to end) we can be ready to support refugees in our area when that is needed. Whilst we can't save the planet on our own, we can keep the eco-church agenda to the fore. It's often said it's the little, one-degree shifts that make the big difference when they are sustained over time. Can we be one-degree better in support of Good Shepherd Ministries, Christian Aid, and the other projects and organisations we are committed to? Can we do things in collaboration with others – whether our local churches or other organisations? Collaboration across our deanery is going to grow, in the short term, helping to cover vacancies at Pattingham and Wombourne, and longer term looking at more effective shoring of resources.

Briefly, three concrete plans, to end with. The first is our new family initiative: *Criss+Cross* is going to be held about once every 6 weeks or so on a Sunday afternoon at Christ Church, starting on 15 May. It's family fun together, with story, craft, activities, worship and food, building relationships, developing a sense of belonging, and growing faith together.

Second, a one-off event on 24th September: Saltmine Theatre Company have been booked to return with their production, 'The Liberator', a modern take on the life of Christ, as he comes to bring hope in a time of hopelessness. A real inspiration!

Third, more conventional, but at this moment for me what brings me most encouragement: at the Deanery Confirmation service on 19th June we have five adult candidates. We met a couple of weeks ago for the first time, and listened to the stories of how each had come to be there. It reminded me of the most important fact of all: that God is in individual lives right now. Sometimes these things are noticed and spoken about. Often, they are not. But God is at work, and the future is in God's hands. Jesus comes to us, as he came to Thomas and the other disciples, saying 'Peace be with you.' That, as Thomas found out, is when doubt turns to belief.