

Sermon for the first Sunday after Easter 2020

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” *John 20 verse 19.*

In a very strange way we are in a position not totally dissimilar to that of the disciples. We are currently in lockdown. We are in our houses with the doors closed to people who do not live with us. We are told that if we go outside we may well be infected with covid-19 and, given our age, this illness could be fatal. The disciples feared for their lives, and today, many of us fear for our lives.

The only thing that changed the outlook for the disciples and generated a will to persevere in the spreading of the gospel message of salvation was the Easter event. Jesus rising from the dead changed them from frightened, whimpering, secluded individuals, into a force which we acknowledge as the foundation of the Christian faith. The transformation of the disciples came about because they came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. It is a miracle beyond all miracles. A hope fulfilled in the reality of the presence of Christ.

We may ask what it is that will give us hope in the face of this Corona virus. The answer for us is evident in the answer for the disciples. Belief in the presence of Jesus Christ and acceptance of the promise of eternal life, which is very much a part of the message, will see us returning to our earthly lives without fear and with thanksgiving. The key to this is, and always will be, faith in our God. At some point, when the time is right, we will throw our doors open and we will resume life among others, and we will once again hold hands, hug, and show our affection and respect with the tactile actions that for us are reassuring and appropriate.

The key is always that we have faith in God. We heard in the gospel the different reactions of the disciples when they were confronted with the risen Jesus. His greeting of “Shalom” must have been such a joy and a relief. These are the people who have run away from the prospect, and the reality of crucifixion. These are the characters who have promised everlasting loyalty and affection for their teacher and friend. These are the men who ran away and hid from the Jews.

The gospel focussed on one disciple in particular. Thomas. We have all met Thomas. We all have a little piece of Thomas in us. We have all been confronted with information which is almost impossible to comprehend. Many of us will have used the phrase that Thomas used. “I will believe it when I see it.” When shown proof of the matter we will also respond positively and accept with joy, or perhaps fear, the truth before us.

It is Thomas who, when he sees Jesus, falls down and acknowledges him to be “My Lord and my God.” it is a remarkable event. The change from doubt to full dedication comes in the space of seconds. In witnessing this change we are encouraged to recognise and to accept the reality of the living God.

Jesus says to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

We are the people who have not seen Jesus in earthly or resurrected form, and yet we believe. It seems that Jesus' comment to Thomas was meant for us.

Does this mean that we have no doubts? Not at all. Does this mean that to have doubts is a sin? No, not at all. What it does mean is that if we do have doubts then we are to look for the information that will answer our questioning minds. It seems to me that to doubt the truth of God is an opportunity to seek a fuller understanding of God. It is an opportunity to search the scriptures for our answers.

The evidence that supports the resurrection of Christ is presented in the first Letter of John. He speaks of the three things that witness to the identity of Jesus. He speaks of water, blood, and the Spirit of truth. It is water in which Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist. It is at Jesus Baptism that God descended like a dove and settled on Jesus and God proclaimed this man to be his Son. God is our witness as recorded at the baptism of Jesus.

When we are baptised it is with water, and by the grace of God we receive the Holy Spirit, we are adopted as God's children and become siblings of Jesus.

Blood is a witness to Jesus' death. It is through his Death that we inherit eternal life. When Jesus is raised to life, we are raised to life with him. Eternal life is therefore ours, now, today. We do not die to inherit eternal life. It was ours through the blood of the cross.

That Jesus is witnessed to by the Spirit is an endorsement of the reality of Christ. We recall in the gospel that Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained." This is an amazing amount of power and authority to be given to the disciples.

Jesus also sends the disciples out into the world to spread the gospel message of salvation. This small group of people launched a movement that two thousand years later can be found in every country around the world. In accepting and believing in the risen Christ the disciples have become the Church.

Even though it is incredibly sad that we cannot gather in our magnificent church for worship, we can be reassured that the church lives on in us. We are the church. Our soul has not been closed. Our prayers have not been shut down. Our faith has not been denied us. The charge to go out and to spread the gospel message of love is still a very important part of our life.

If we cannot go out and meet up with others in coffee shops and street corners we can certainly pick up the phone and let people know that we care, and that we are praying for them. We do not have to replicate the disciples and lock ourselves away in fear and trembling. In this day and age there are many opportunities for us to reach out in love for others, without even leaving our house. Let us seek to be as Christ on earth, and in faith and belief allow others to share our joy in the risen Christ.

Amen