

Sermon for 16 April 2023
Easter 2 (Low Sunday), Year A

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are many food-related jokes in the comic novel *Good Omens*, written jointly by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. The food jokes form part of a large body of evidence that the angel Aziraphale has got very comfortable with life on earth disguised as a human since the days when he unprofessionally gave Adam and Eve his own flaming sword on the occasion of their banishment from Eden because he felt sorry for them.

The angel Aziraphale has, gastronomically, gone completely native. He loves wine and cocktails, pears, crepes, brioche, oysters. In the book, there is just a single reference to sushi, but it is important: it is the decisive blow in his friend the demon Crowley's argument that Aziraphale won't enjoy being back in heaven after the apocalypse, because there won't be any sushi restaurants there, and, the narrator says, "a look of pain crossed Aziraphale's face".

This idea was taken further in the television adaptation: the archangel Gabriel, played wonderfully by John Hamm of *Mad Men*, expresses disbelief that Aziraphale, who does not *need* food, still chooses to eat it. The scene is, of course, set in a sushi restaurant. Gabriel's response to Aziraphale's attempt to explain his love of sushi is this: "I do not sully the temple of my celestial body with gross matter."

This makes me wonder if Gaiman, who wrote the script for the TV series, has read Augustine. It is clear that the angel doesn't *need* food, but he adores it anyway, and, importantly, he is physically capable of consuming it.

Augustine had several thoughts about the mystery of what our post-resurrection bodies would be like, writing that although we cannot

know the character of a spiritual body, “certainly there will be no corruption in them, and for this reason they will not then need this corruptible food that they now need. They will, nonetheless, be able to take and really consume such food... *Otherwise, the Lord would not have taken food after his resurrection.*”

We believe in bodily resurrection in the afterlife because it is taught in the scriptures: since the resurrected Christ has a body, so will we. He is, after all, our pattern in all things. A significant clue about what these bodies will be like may be gleaned from our gospel passage this morning: Christ’s resurrected body eats and drinks, and is still, in fact, sufficiently wounded to be able to present physical evidence of his identity to the apostle Thomas.

“When he appeared,” writes St Augustine, “with all the members of his body and used their functions, he also displayed the places of his wounds. I have always taken these as scars, “ he goes on, “not actual wounds, and saw them as the result of his power, not of some necessity.”

John chapter 20, which we heard just now, contains the scene: “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

Thomas the apostle somehow misses this encounter - perhaps he was out for sushi with a friend at the time - and history has given him a lot of grief for “doubting”, even giving him the nickname “doubting Thomas”, forgetting that the other disciples were shown exactly the same things *he* wanted to see when *they* first saw the Lord.

But doubt is no bad thing. The doubt expressed by Thomas is just as much a human attribute as his own physical body. It is perhaps better expressed not as doubt but as a need for evidence. The other disciples tell him they’ve seen the Lord, and he says he will not “believe” until he both sees and touches Jesus’ wounded body. But believe in what? In the resurrection? In the fact that the others have seen him? Perhaps

something else: he seems to be begging for proof that Jesus has not been changed, that the resurrected one is the same one who taught and ate with them before his death. For the beloved, smoothly perfect, would not be the same beloved who hung on the cross.

We are all maps of our experiences and hurts, with scars both mental and physical, no matter how privileged our lives have been. This week I have been reflecting on the universal tendency to jokingly exaggerate the source of an old injury. My left shin has a strange smooth scar on it, the result of stepping sleepily out of my mother's car and straight into an uncovered stormwater drain in Singapore when I was twelve. It has shrunk, of course, but it will never go away. When my children have noticed it, I've told them the story, without too much embellishment, but how much more enjoyable it will be in thirty years to tell my grandchildren, "That's from when I fought off a shark."

As much as we might wish that the things that caused them had never happened, we would not be ourselves without our scars, physical and emotional. Just as a serious injury might leave a person with a slight limp, a bad experience can change one's behaviour forever.

Now is not the time or place to talk about trauma theory, and I am in any case unqualified to do so. But we can talk about love. Love is the provenance of the baptised Christian, because Jesus Christ is the best example of love that we have, and the apostle Thomas, who loved Christ so much that he begged for proof that this was really he, shows us much about what it means to love as a fragile human being.

Rosa Lyster, writing two years ago in the online magazine *Gawker*, reflected that for poor George Smiley of the le Carre novels, so jovially mocked by his colleagues for his dogged determination to remain married to his horrifically unfaithful wife Ann, his love is actually a superpower that makes him an unparalleled spymaster. His love for Ann, undeserving though she is, appears to be a great weakness, and it is undeniable that it makes him quite unhappy, but it also makes him vastly more aware of how humans, and their loyalties, operate. It ultimately helps him to catch Karla, who is his great rival, the spider at the centre of

Moscow intelligence. Love in le Carre is a weakness and a strength: it hones the antennae. It makes Smiley smarter, and better at his job, because it keeps him vulnerable enough to never assume anything.

The love of the gospels is entirely bound up with vulnerability. And the scars on Christ's body show us that unassailable perfection would simply not be human. If Jesus was the most human person ever to live, then we must not be embarrassed by our own scars. They are proof that we have existed, and that we have loved. For what could be better evidence of love than the wound in his side and the nail-marks in his hands and feet?

St Thomas could be held up as an exemplar for thinking Anglicans because he doubts and questions. But how much lovelier to remember him today, and on his feast day on July 3rd, as the apostle who demanded evidence of love. How much better to take pride in the love that shows itself in self-giving on the cross, and to imitate that love every chance we get. Christ would not be himself without his scars, and neither would we. Augustine saw those scars as the result of Christ's power, and we understand them as evidence of his glorification and his great love for us.

The joy we have in the resurrection is great. But it does not erase the crucifixion, and neither would we want it to. We hold these things in solemn tension throughout the year, as we hold the paradox of a wounded, broken saviour. Where the resurrection gives us hope, the cross is where love is most in evidence, where love is glorified. That love is one that embraces us all, including our scars.

Amen.