

St. Mary Magdalen
3rd Sunday of Easter 2019

John 21: 1-19

In these Sundays after Easter we are reading in the Gospels and in Acts accounts of how the first disciples struggled to come to terms with the implications of the empty tomb. We can overhear these struggles in the early part of Acts as it records the early preaching and actions of the disciples. While the Gospel writers teach through pictures – and portray various meetings between Jesus and his bewildered friends – in locked rooms, on the road to Emmaus, and on the shore of Lake Galilee. From our perspective, and particularly given the high ceremonial of the Easter Liturgy, we can easily forget the persistent theme in the biblical accounts of fear, disbelief and bewilderment. Some of the most ancient texts bring the earliest gospel, that of Mark, to an end with the words, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) Thomas has been singled out by repute as doubting Thomas; but he was surely not alone in his bewilderment and his wish for some certainty. All those early friends of Jesus were coming through doubt and fear and bewilderment, to realise that something totally new had happened. This was not some ghostly apparition. This was not the resuscitation of someone clearly dead as in the case of Lazarus or Jairus’s daughter. It was a new and abounding and different quality of life which had broken in on the natural order – and it was still bewildering, frightening even; but altogether joyful.

Today’s gospel reading is the conclusion to the latest gospel to be written of the four gospels. As we know John is very different from the three synoptic gospels. It does not claim to be an accurate or entire account of the life of Christ, but is a profound theological meditation on who Christ was and is; designed to teach new generations of Christians. The final verse of the chapter before our reading makes this plain and reads like a closing statement of intent: what he had written was chosen, selected from so much that Jesus did and said, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20: 31)

Our reading provides material for many sermons. Some preachers would doubtless talk about the gracious hospitality of Christ to his one-time cowardly friends; and how he makes himself known in the breaking of bread. Others would take up the symbolism of the fish. And yet others would meditate on the threefold charge to Peter after he has been invited three times to affirm his love for Jesus, in counterpoint to his three-fold denial during Jesus's trial. What I find striking and most helpful is that the risen Christ takes the initiative – he comes, he looks at them from the shore; his gaze and then his words and actions make them realize who he is. The stranger setting up a barbeque for breakfast is revealed as the Christ: "It is the Lord".

We don't think very often about the gaze of God: the fact that he looks at us and how he looks at us. Some other religious traditions take the gaze of the holy very seriously. In the Hindu tradition there is the lovely and compelling tradition of seeing and being seen by the holy in its many forms. People will go to places or to people with a reputation for sanctity and just sit and look, expecting that holiness will look back at them and change them. They sometimes sit in front of a holy image with the same hope. When Christians of another generation met this practice they spoke angrily of idolatry. But the Hindu image, like the Christian Orthodox icon points to something far beyond itself – to the numinous which cannot be seen or put into words.

In the Old Testament when God looks at someone it is seen as profoundly dangerous. People fall on their faces, they hide or they attempt to run away. In the great creation stories of Genesis Adam and Eve are archetypal hidiers: "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." (Genesis 3:8) Of course they find there is no hiding place. When Moses turns aside to see the burning bush and encountered God his reaction was to hide his face, because "he was afraid to look at God." (Exodus 3:6) Much later in his life after leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert he asks to see God's glory; and is told "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." (Exodus 33:20) Elijah wraps his face in his cloak when God finds him hiding in a cave and tells him to come out and stand on the mountain as God is about to pass by. (I Kings 19:13). Or

there is Jonah. He tries to flee from the presence of God by paying to go on a ship sailing from Joppa to Tarshish. We know how that works out for him and how fruitless is his attempt to escape.

But in the psalms we also sense the dawning of the knowledge that the gaze of God is a gracious one. (Ps. 139) “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Or in Psalm 27 we hear the psalmist call out: “ ‘Come, my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.” (Ps.28: 8-9)

The New Testament witness is that the gaze of God is transformative love. It is at times searing as it sees sin; as Peter found out. It is Luke who records that after Peter’s third denial of any knowledge of Jesus, “The Lord turned and looked at Peter.” (Luke 22: 61) - and Peter went out and wept bitterly. But the gaze of Christ also loves us back into communion with him – as we have heard this morning. Fr. Rowan Williams wrote some years back in a book on the different accounts of Christ’s trial, “The Old Testament asks whether a human being can see God and live. The gospel poses another question: whether we can *be seen* by God and live.” The accounts of the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection suggest that it is only when **we are seen** by God in the risen Christ that the resurrection life begins to grow in us and to remake us for his glory. It is for us, as it was for Mary Magdalen, for Peter and John, for Thomas, and for countless Christians since: the gaze of Christ pierces but transforms in love. It is only within the gaze of Christ that we begin to live lives of faith and love, lives which reflect the on-going nature and power of resurrection. Outside that transforming gaze the practice of religion is dead and lifeless – what we do by choice, off our own bat, so to say – rather than a response to an encounter with the Christ of Easter.

But how does this encounter come about? The point of course is that WE DON’T MAKE IT HAPPEN. It is Christ who takes the initiative – just as he did in all the gospel accounts of his resurrection appearances. He comes to Mary in the garden. He

meets the two unnamed disciples walking to Emmaus. He appears on successive Sunday mornings where his friends are gathered. He appears on the lake shore. None of these encounters were in particularly holy places – the disciples were going about their ordinary lives or were huddling together in fear behind locked doors. So too for us. He comes in places and at times of his own choosing. We have to watch and wait; to be still in hope and expectation. Perhaps this is our particular task in these days between our Easter celebrations and Pentecost.