

2nd Sunday of Easter, 2021

John 20:19-31

Our gospel today includes the story of Thomas, and will doubtless mean that many sermons are preached on “doubting Thomas”. It is a description which is very unfair. Once Thomas sees Jesus he recognises him as “My Lord and my God”. What a contrast to others of Jesus’s closest friends. Mary at first does not recognise him and mistakes him for a gardener. Luke tells us that two disciples walked with him towards the village of Emmaus, heard him expound scripture, and still did not recognise him until he sat with them at table, took, blessed and broke bread and gave it to them.

For the writer of John’s gospel the two resurrection appearances we have heard read today are about much more than Thomas. He has made a choice about what to write, and he says that there was so much more he could have written. But these appearances are described so that those who hear and read his gospel “my come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Of course we belong to the company of those to whom the gospel is addressed so how might we begin to understand the choice of the writer?

First in the context of the gospel itself, as an intentional composition, we need to recognise the links between what we have heard just now and the earlier discourses recorded in the same gospel, mainly in chapter 14, and placed at the final supper Jesus shared with his friends. Before his death he made important promises which are now fulfilled after the resurrection.

First of course he comes to his disciples: he makes himself known in his resurrection life. He has conquered death and now comes to them in their grief and fear. As he had promised, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” He had promised them his peace and urged them not to be fearful. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Now he confirms this with the greeting, “Peace be with you.” He gives them his peace in the most unlikely of situations. He had promised to ask the Father to send them a comforter, an advocate, the Spirit of Truth. Now he

breathes on them and fills them with his spirit – echoing the Jewish symbolism of God breathing on his creation at the dawn of time, and of course breathing on the dry bones which Ezekiel saw – and they stood up and lived. It is this gift of Christ's own spirit which gives them the power to go out into the hostile world in his name, and makes the Christian community a healing and forgiving community, where people experience the outpouring of God's love.

But what does this mean for us? We are part of the community who are now included in these promises and their fulfilment. We hear and read them so that believing we might have life in his name. But let me just underline two of them.

The first is really very obvious, though I suspect that we often forget it. Jesus comes to us where we are – in fear and doubt often – and through closed doors when we least expect him. It is a promise very apposite for these pandemic times when so many people have been and still are literally behind closed doors, and when people are very fearful of the outside world. But in more normal times, we all of us experience fear and doubt, just like the first disciples. Which of us does not feel fearful at times for ourselves, for our loved ones and for our world? Which of us is not sometimes afflicted with doubts about our faith and particularly about our church, which seems so prone to scandal and incompetence, so unlike a forgiving and healing community of which we read in the New Testament, a place where all are welcome. Some good and faithful Christians are embarrassed or afraid to admit to doubt. But doubt it is not the opposite of faith – it is its bedfellow. We live by faith in Jesus, not by what the unbelieving world would call sight or certainty. As the author of Hebrews memorably put it, (ch. 11, v.1), “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” There follows the wonderful passage about the Old Testament figures who lived by faith, from Abel onwards. With such a cloud of witnesses the readers and we are urged to persevere and to look to Jesus, to consider Him.

Christian experience is that so often it is in these dark places where faith seems fragile, where doubt and fear seem to imprison us, that Christ makes Himself known. He comes when we least expect Him, and when our fears and faithlessness seem to have locked the door against him. “Dark nights” in our human lives are a well known aspect of our life with God, and often the occasion of great spiritual fruitfulness. It is

important to hear this message on so-called Low Sunday – when the great celebration of Holy Week and Easter is over and we may quite literally be feeling low and tired.

The other action of Jesus in this set of stories fulfils the promise of a Comforter, an Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathes his spirit on his frightened friends. In John's gospel this "breathing" replaces any account of Pentecost as given in Matthew and Acts. It is an empowering and creative action, God's breath coming into man, so that broken men and women might stand up and live – to echo Ezekiel. To use language more familiar in the New Testament, it is the way Christ grows his own life in us, the way he recreates us daily so that we may grow into his body on earth. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus about the graces and gifts Christ gives to his followers. They were and are very diverse, but all are given "to equip the saints in the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Ephesians 4: 11-13)

Christ's coming and breathing his spirit into us is that which enables His peace to enter our lives, and also our going out to be His body in the world. It may be Low Sunday but these are promises which are profound and life-changing. Christ promises to grow and live his Resurrection Life in each one of us, so that that life may be let loose in His world.