

Rector's Sermon: 19th April 2020

On this Low Sunday it initially seems like we have been brought down to earth with a bump after the glorious celebration of last Sunday. We are given one of the most famous post resurrection stories and one of the most famous post resurrection characters – doubting Thomas – the one who didn't believe, the one who questioned and demanded proof that Jesus really had risen. Thomas is not spending the first week of Easter shouting out 'Alleluia, Christ is risen!'

We can imagine the ten disciples seeking out Thomas after the first Easter Sunday and crying out, "We have seen the Lord!" And we can imagine Thomas saying, "Unless I see and touch the scars in his hands and plunge my own hand in that hole on his side, I will not believe it." Poor doubting Thomas. He gets such a raw deal in this passage for he only responds as we would. And yet I seriously question whether we would respond as Thomas does in our Gospel passage today.

We are creatures who demand proof, the proof of three of our senses, most especially: seeing, touching, hearing. We like to dissect, analyse, compare. And in this age, when we have abandoned mystery, it becomes harder and harder to believe.

The resurrected Christ, ever mindful of those he has chosen and loved, grants Thomas his wish. A week later, they are all together again, Thomas among them, and Jesus appears as before to offer them his peace. He has come for Thomas, and he turns to him immediately and offers him and us an extraordinary invitation. "Bring your finger here and see my hands; bring your hand and plunge it in my side."

Thomas response is quite extraordinary and elevates him for me as one of the greatest of all evangelists. Without needing to touch, Thomas cries out the one declaration of faith that matters: "My Lord and my God." He is confronted not by the familiar Jesus, but by the Christ of God. He doesn't need to touch to know. He sees before him his beloved teacher who now bears the open unhealed wounds of human suffering unto eternity.

Just over a century ago, the First World War created unimaginable death and suffering. Poets examined that suffering in their writings, longing to believe in a God who would allow such horrors among people who were supposed to be civilized. One of those poets, a Christian by the name of Edward Shillito, found the only answer that made sense to him:

"He showed them His hands and His side."

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;

Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;

We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

As I suggested last week on Easter Day, as a Christian church, through our experience of pandemic, are finding ourselves gazing upon the open wounds of the risen Christ and we are finding it deeply uncomfortable, because it forces us to confront our own unprocessed vulnerabilities. It is far more comfortable for us to gaze upon the divinity of the risen Christ and, if we are truly being honest, that is what we have primarily chosen to do since the time of the resurrection. Just look at the vast majority of art over the centuries on the risen body. It focuses on the divinity of Christ and rarely plays more than lip service to the open wounds - maybe a small scar on each wrist and on each foot and in his side, whereas Christ's awesome divinity is revered, celebrated and worshipped.

I believe that in and through this crisis we, like Thomas, are being called to gaze primarily on Christ's open and unhealed wounds. We are being invited, like Thomas, to put our fingers into his side and, as individuals and as a church, all we want to do is recoil. Unlike Thomas, I want to recoil as the pain and suffering at times feels too much and I fear it will overwhelm me. And yet through his risen body Christ reveals that there is nowhere Christ can't go, that there is no suffering that Christ cannot enter, that there is no pandemic that Christ cannot transform and transfigure.

The question for me and I believe for us as the church is, can we be like St Thomas and respond confidently to Jesus' fearful invitation with the extraordinary cry of faith, 'My Lord and my God'?

Revd. Tim