

My Lord and my God

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 28th April 2019 by the vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-end

Well, Easter was only a week ago but the world is still quite a difficult place in which to live. Our leaders still have to grapple with problems that resist any neat and tidy solutions: we've been hearing more in the headlines about a looming environmental crisis; about international terrorism; and after an all too brief a respite, even Brexit is back; the four horsemen of the Apocalypse are still alive and well and doing brisk business bringing war, famine, disease, and death around the world. And in our own lives, all the usual challenges of being human are still there: difficult memories that we can't change; difficult relationships that may cause us pain; difficult circumstances that may threaten to overwhelm us. Our past, our circumstances, and our relationships are rarely perfect. And the imperfections prevent us from flourishing - they stop us from being the people we would like to be. And none of this goes away simply because it's Easter.

But last week we were celebrating the victory of God. On Easter Day we were rejoicing in the good news of the resurrection. "Alleluia", we cried, "Christ is risen!" And at the ten thirty service Ben and I spoke about the resurrection of Jesus Christ as God's mighty "YES" to his creation, despite the combined human rejection of Jesus. All the forces which led to his crucifixion were overcome, and the world's "NO" became God's "YES", a mighty word of affirmation to the world he has made. And in that "YES" we see the beginnings of renewal for all things. And yet, the world is still a difficult place in which to live: has anything really changed as a result of Jesus's resurrection? Isn't it all a bit hollow?

Well, when I turn back to the New Testament, I find that these questions aren't very new. One of the reasons why I find the Bible to be quite an encouraging text is because it does tend to be honest. And when we read about Jesus's disciples, it's usually not

difficult to recognise ourselves. And so it is with today's Gospel reading: according to John, Jesus has been raised and has shown himself to Mary Magdalene in the garden, who has brought the good news to the other disciples: "I have seen the Lord", she says. And for a moment everything sounds wonderful. But then, John takes us immediately to the evening of that first Easter day. The disciples, with the exception of Thomas, are in the upper room and the mood is not one of excitement and rejoicing, the mood is one of fear: the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. That is the first reaction of the followers of Jesus to the message of the resurrection: fear of the implications of the resurrection.

The disciples are concerned for their reputation and of what others might think of them; they're concerned for their safety; they're concerned for their future because if Jesus is risen, what might that mean for them, for their families and for the world; everything is uncertain; and they feel vulnerable.

In the midst of the good news of the resurrection, the Church is afraid, and the Bible has never made any secret of that. It is there in the other gospels as well: Mark's Gospel ends with the women running away from the empty tomb 'afraid', it says; Luke has them being 'terrified' as they encounter the angels. Whatever else the resurrection does, it doesn't stop Christians from being afraid: there was plenty to be afraid of then and there's plenty to be afraid of now. But despite the locked doors, despite the risks and despite the fear, the risen Lord came and stood among them and made himself present to them. And then John tells us the story of Thomas and his famous reluctance to believe, and we know that Thomas's doubts are reasonable.

One of the basic things we know about this world we inhabit is that dead people don't come back. Life on Earth is miraculous but it is also finite. Death marks a boundary that can only be crossed one way: there is no return ticket. So even if we are attracted to Jesus, even if we warm to his teaching and feel drawn to him as a person, to believe in him as if he is still present and to worship him as God - well, it's hardly surprising if people have a few doubts about that. People can't be blamed if they find that rather too much to swallow. Those who hold back, who hesitate, who find they can't believe even though they want to - those folk have their official representative in Thomas: he didn't find it easy to believe either. He wanted certainty, proof, the evidence of his own eyes.

So those of us who have questions about the resurrection, who are unsure about our response to Jesus and who hesitate about committing ourselves, actually we're there in the story too - it's full of questions and doubt and hesitation. And it's there in the other gospels too: when Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee at the end of Matthew's gospel, we're told that some of them worshipped, but also some doubted. So there's fear in this story and there is also doubt. And when Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room he shows them his wounds. I find this one of the most fascinating parts of the story: the body of the risen Lord is not perfect and made good, as if nothing has happened; it's not even healed - the holes left by the nails and the spear are still open, so that Thomas can be invited to put his fingers and even his hand in them. These are open wounds; the marks of suffering and death have been raised along with the rest of Jesus's body. And the risen and ascended Son of God who is enthroned in the heavens and seated in glory at the right hand of God, still bears those wounds - and will continue to do so throughout all eternity.

I don't know what wounds you carry around with you. All of us have scars of one kind or another: physical, emotional or psychological. I don't know whether you have ever been tempted to feel that your wounds or the wounds in the world around you, make it harder to take the Easter message seriously. The Resurrection does not mean that suffering has somehow been transcended and left behind: signs of it have been carried through into the new heavens and the new earth; God takes our sufferings so seriously, that their marks continue before death and are always before him in the body of the risen Lord. Somehow the pain is taken up and transformed in new life, but it isn't obvious to me that Jesus's pain entirely disappears: it's still part of who he is.

And Jesus offers his wounds not only to Thomas but to all the disciples, as his credentials: they are part of what qualify him to be our saviour; they are part of what makes it possible for us to trust him and to believe in him because his wounds show that he can identify with us and draw near to us in our woundedness - "Put your finger here and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side; do not doubt, but believe". Thomas says, "My Lord, and my God."

So on that first Easter Day the stories are shot through with fear, with doubt, and with woundedness. All the things that make up our daily experience in the world today and which we find hard to imagine our lives without - they're all there as part of the story: fear, doubt and injury. But they're not incompatible with resurrection, they're part of it.

And into the midst of this gathering of people just like us, coping with fears and doubts and pain just like you and me, the risen Lord comes and is present. Initially he just came and stood among them, so if nothing else, the resurrection means that Jesus is present, whatever the nature of the locked doors: nothing can keep him out; nothing can separate us from his love. And he speaks a word of peace, "Peace be with you." And that message addresses our fear, our doubt and our pain.

Jesus experienced gut-wrenching fear in Gethsemane; he experienced fundamental doubt in God's faithfulness at the moment of death as he cried, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"; he experienced the physical and spiritual agony of crucifixion: and yet he comes through all of that, able to offer his disciples a promise of peace. So the presence of the risen Lord calms and soothes your fears whatever they may be; whatever challenges you face; whatever threatens to overwhelm you. However difficult the choices you face, nothing can separate you from the love of the risen Lord and the peace which that brings.

And the presence of the risen Lord addresses your doubts. He doesn't offer proof of the resurrection or intellectual rational arguments that will settle it to everyone's satisfaction, but he comes and stands in the midst of every worshipping community and says, "Peace be with you." And if you can suspend disbelief for long enough to hear that message and to be open to it, and to receive it and respond to it - in other words, if you can simply trust that he is here and that his message of peace is for you, then it starts to make sense, even though you can't prove it - and faith provides a basis for living and a shape for action much better than doubt ever can.

And the presence of the risen Lord can be a balm and an ointment for your wounds. The Resurrection doesn't change what's happened in the past and it doesn't protect anyone from the forces of history, but it does mean we deal with these things not on our

own but in the presence of the Lord of life. And whenever we feel battered and hurt, or ground down by circumstances which overwhelm us and feel hostile, the presence of the risen Lord assures us that eventually we shall win through. The Lord speaks his word of peace to those who are afraid, to those who doubt and to those who are hurting. He speaks his word of peace to those who are physically present and able to see him and touch him, and to those far away in history and geography and yet who believe. Jesus stands among us, holds us in His loving gaze and says, "Peace be with you."

And then the amazing thing is he breathes upon his disciples; he breathes his Holy Spirit still, upon you and me; upon the fearful, the doubting, the hurting people who make up the church in this day as in every age, and he sends us out to serve him: "As the father has sent me, so I send you."

You are well-placed to reach out to all those other people out there who are also fearful, who are doubtful and who are full of pain. You are well-placed not because you are strong or successful, but because you share in that experience of fear and doubt and pain and yet you remain open to the spirit of the risen Lord. So let him breathe upon you afresh; let him fill you with his presence in bread and wine this morning; let him send you to demonstrate in word and deed the reality of Christ's risen presence in the world today; and let him open your lips to cry with Thomas:

"My Lord, and my God."