

Readings for the Second Sunday of Easter

11th April 2021

First Reading: Acts 4:32-35

The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Second Reading: 1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Gospel: St John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, 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. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter

On Easter Sunday morning, I caught part of the 'Sunday' programme on Radio 4, in which they were speaking to various people about where their faith met and intersected with another passion in their life. One of the interviewees was the actor, Sir David Suchet. Last Sunday, a recording of Sir David reading St John's Gospel in Westminster Abbey was released, and he was speaking about his passion for the Bible and his passion for acting both being about people. Sir David has, of course, appeared in many films and television dramas, but it is for his role as Agatha Christie's famous detective, Hercule Poirot, that he will always be remembered. This, even though he described his passion for the Bible as greater than his undoubtedly great passion for the role of Poirot. I was reminded of this interview when reading this morning's Gospel. Sir David will always be remembered primarily as Poirot, although his passion for the Bible is greater. Thomas, in today's Gospel, is forever remembered as 'doubting Thomas' for this one event, although it was not the end of his story.

Each year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we have this Gospel reading from John which tells us how Jesus appeared to his disciples on the evening of the first Easter day, turning their sadness and fear to joy, of how Thomas missed this momentous moment, and of how he doubted what he was told by the others. I often feel that Thomas is hard done by in being remembered primarily for this doubt. If we had been in his position, would we not have found the disciples' account hard to swallow? Would we not have expressed a desire for a bit more evidence? Thomas strikes me as engaged in a very human struggle to reconcile his faith and his doubts.

And Thomas was not the only one who was engaged in a struggle on the evening of that first Easter Day. Last week, we heard Mark's account of how the women fled from the tomb in terror and told no-one what they had seen, at least to start with. At the start of today's Gospel, the disciples are found in fear of the Jewish authorities and behind locked doors. During Jesus' ministry, they had all struggled to understand Jesus' prophecies about his death and resurrection, and when he was arrested they had run away, and Peter had denied him repeatedly.

But, when Jesus came to the disciples that evening, he did not rebuke them for their fear or lack of understanding, or for their desertion of him, or Peter for his denials that he knew Jesus. Nor did he rebuke Thomas later for his doubts. Instead he accepted the disciples as they were, human and flawed, and commissioned them to continue his work in the world: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. In John's Gospel, they were given the Holy Spirit at this point, to become like Jesus. Luke, of course, delays the giving of the Holy Spirit until Pentecost. Nevertheless, the

message is the same: they were sent to proclaim the resurrection and to love and forgive as Jesus does. It was the beginning of the new community of believers, the church.

All the readings today tell us something of how the early church lived out that commission, and prompts us to consider how we should also do so in our own time and place.

The passage from Acts makes us, in the 21st Century developed world, squirm. We live in a materialistic society and it rubs off on us, however much we might not want it to. Frankly, we don't want to give up our possessions, not all of them. We give generously we tell ourselves – and I'm sure that's true.

'Everything they owned was held in common'. I am not going to excuse or play down this text which is there to challenge us all. However, we should also note that it is immediately followed by 'the Apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' – they were sharing their spiritual gifts too. 'And great grace was upon them all' – through sharing of both these gifts. What is shown here is the ideal of a Christian community – nourished and encouraged by mutuality and sharing, and in complete contrast to the surrounding Roman society characterised by exploitation and an economic system based on masters and slaves. It is followed by the account of Barnabas who did just what is stated: he sold a field and brought the money to the disciples for the community. And then there follows the account of Ananias and Sapphira who also sold some property but tried to cheat the community, keeping some of the money back for themselves while pretending to give everything, effectively lying to God as well as the community.

Our task, and not an easy one, is to work out what the ideal means in our society today, and for us as individuals. It is not so much about what we own or don't own but about our attitude to our possessions and our gifts and how we use them. It is worth remembering that God is made manifest not only in the breaking of bread but in the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the naked, the countering of discrimination and injustice, the tackling climate change, and in building a society that prioritises wholeness and mutual care of our neighbours, both local and global.

The first letter of John was written to a community that was, on the face of it, less than ideal. It had been fractured by disagreement, and the writer reminds them that genuine Christian community is grounded in embracing the life that God offers, receiving it with joy. Such a fellowship does not depend on agreement in all things but on a shared faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ that brings eternal life.

The writer then contrasts light and darkness, calling the readers to walk in the light of God, living in such a way that they are known for their allegiance to God and God's ways. For us, it is perhaps more helpful here to see light and darkness not as two separate and distinct categories but as a series of concentric circles around a central light. What is important is our direction of movement, towards the light. It is also worth noting that being in the light is not portrayed as a state of sinless perfection but our ability to be honest about our sin and the ways we get things wrong, and to confess that sin, acknowledging our dependence on God's grace. It is one reason why confession and absolution are so important in our liturgy: being honest about our shortcomings as individuals and as a community, expressing trust in God's mercy, and affirming our desire to do better, we are assured that nothing separates us from God's love.

When Jesus returned a week later to the house where the disciples were, he opened himself to Thomas in a way that responded to his needs, a way in which Thomas could understand and receive him. And Jesus also spoke to us and to all readers of the Gospel, commending those of future generations, when he said 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'.

Like Thomas, our experience of the resurrection should be transformative. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury wrote '...resurrection is first an experience of forgiveness and healing which creates new patterns of life.' Our readings today tell us of some of those new patterns of life in the early church and encourage us, to take that next step towards the light on the journey of faith, and to re-evaluate our priorities where necessary. Thomas may forever be remembered as 'doubting Thomas', Sir David Suchet may always be remembered as Poirot, but both discovered a greater truth. As the last verse of today's Gospel says: 'These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'.