

## Readings for the Third Sunday of Easter

18<sup>th</sup> April 2021

### First Reading: Acts 3:12-19

Peter addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

### Second Reading: 1 John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

### Gospel: St Luke 24:36-48

While the eleven and their companions were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

## A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter

Yesterday, the funeral of The Duke of Edinburgh took place, although, at the time of writing, it was still a few days ahead. I find that funerals are often a revelation about the person who has died, telling me things about them that I had never known, even if I thought I had known them quite well. I have often wished I had known or asked more.

In the case of The Duke of Edinburgh, there wasn't a eulogy at his funeral, but a great deal has been said about his life in the past week, and many have been surprised about some of the things that have come out. One of those things was the depth of his personal Christian faith. As someone commented on the radio this week, we knew of the depth of the Queen's faith for she often speaks of it, but Philip was much more in the shadows and rarely spoke about himself. And yet, it transpires that his faith was far from passive; it informed and motivated his work, permeating all that he did.

In the programme *Beyond Belief* this week, Prince Philip's work was being discussed by people of various faiths. His view was that religion should be fresh, meaningful and relevant, and that there was no area of modern life in which religion didn't have something to say - not to dominate, but to contribute its values and inform those of others who could benefit from religious insights. In 1966, with the then Dean of Windsor, he established St George's House, a place where clergy and others, of faith and no faith, could meet to discuss issues in privacy and with confidentiality. Consultations on subjects such as 'faith and business ethics', 'religion and conservation', and 'sectarian violence' took place, bringing together people who would otherwise not meet, who didn't want to meet, or who thought they had nothing in common. Despite accounts elsewhere of Prince Philip's somewhat feisty, or even brusque approach, on these occasions it was his humility and attitude of service that came to the fore.

One of the areas in which Prince Philip worked, long before it became relatively commonplace, was that of inter-faith dialogue, and I was reminded of this by today's readings. These readings continue with the theme of last week, recounting the appearances of the risen Christ and of the experiences of the early church as they worked out what it meant to live as Christians in the light of the resurrection. But there is one aspect of many of the Easter readings that always leave me feeling a little uncomfortable, and that is the references to 'the Jews'.

Today's passage from Acts comes just after Peter has healed a man who had been lame from birth. As was the case during Jesus' ministry, the healing, which should have been a cause for joy, stirs up resentment, anger and, ultimately, persecution. Here, Peter responds to those who are filled with wonder and amazement by the healing, proclaiming that it was accomplished in the name of Jesus. But, in doing so, he piles on the accusations – Jesus was the Messiah, the 'Holy and Righteous One', the 'Author of Life' and they had rejected him and had him killed.

Today, we cringe, or should do, as Peter blames the Jews for the rejection and murder of Jesus. In last week's Gospel reading, we should similarly have cringed when we read that the disciples were behind locked doors 'for fear of the Jews'. These, and passages like them, have been understood and interpreted in a literal and simplistic way, and used to justify anti-Semitism for centuries, with dreadful consequences. We must always remember that it was quite a small group of Jewish leaders, collaborating with a few of the Roman authorities, who orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion with the intention of getting rid of someone who threatened their power. It is vital that we understand that it was not the responsibility of the whole Jewish people then, and certainly not their descendants in subsequent centuries.

Acts doesn't tell us exactly who the audience of Peter's accusations are – it simply refers to 'the people', those who were round and about the Temple. Possibly, there were one or two among them who actually bore some responsibility. The guilt of the people was perhaps more in being complicit in an unjust system, and that is a danger we still face today. In this era of 'fake news', it is easy to be carried along by false impressions, misled by false information we do not bother to check. We have a responsibility to do better than that – to make sure we find out more, to check the facts.

It was this I was reminded of when I heard the piece about Prince Philip's work in inter-faith dialogue. Such work is designed to overcome the misunderstandings and discrimination of centuries. And, as Christians, we have the responsibility both to understand our own faith as best we can and to try to learn from the faith of others. In today's Gospel reading, we see that when Jesus appeared to his followers, once he had overcome their initial shock, turning their fear to joy, what he did was to explain the Scriptures to them. His own suffering and resurrection were the fulfilment of the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms – the Jewish Scriptures and our Old Testament. It is a reminder, if we need it, that the view that the new covenant of Christianity replaces the covenant of God with the Jews is not correct. Jesus is the fulfilment not the replacement.

Within those Scriptures, we find the loving character of God, whose desire to redeem his people necessitated the suffering and resurrection of his Son to overcome the power of sin and death. And in today's passage from the first letter of John, we are reminded that, as children of God, sin no longer has any power over us. We may struggle to equate this with the reality of our lives, when we know that we often get things wrong, but we should remember that we are in a process of transformation that will only be complete when we finally see God face to face. Being a child of God is a gift and we need to embrace that gift by allowing the love of God to work in and through us. We may not get it right all the time, but we can hope that there is, at least, some family resemblance!

As we saw last week, God's attitude when we get it wrong is not one of rebuke but of understanding and mercy. If we are repentant, we will be forgiven. Genuine repentance is, of course, more than a statement of regret; it is a response that changes the way we think and behave. In Acts, Peter called the people to repentance, promising that their sins would be wiped out. In the Gospel, Jesus himself declares that repentance and forgiveness are to be proclaimed to all nations as a consequence of his suffering and resurrection.

One look at the news bulletins shows us clearly that misunderstandings and discrimination between peoples of different backgrounds and perspectives continue. Whatever our own view of Prince Philip as an individual, it strikes me that the approach which he tried to promote, particularly in the area of inter-faith dialogue, is one that we could all usefully learn from and emulate. We are called to take the values of our faith and use them to inform and motivate all that we do, infused with the love of God, and with an attitude of humility and mercy.