

Sunday 8 April 2018

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

Sense and Non-Sense

Happy Easter! Today is the second Sunday of Easter, what used to be called "Low Sunday". We are still celebrating that Easter moment when we emerge from the misery and mistakes of Friday into the light and life of the Resurrection. Because this is the liturgical year when our Gospel readings come from John and Mark, today we hear a gospel reading from John, about one of my favourite New Testament people, Thomas the Twin, also known as doubting Thomas.

We don't hear much about Thomas in the first three gospels. He is just a name on a list for Matthew, Mark, and Luke: his name stands there, coupled with that of Matthew, but we learn nothing to distinguish him as a person, unlike, say, Peter, or the sons of Zebedee. John tells us more about him. He was also called 'Didymos', which is Greek for 'twin', which is actually what his Aramaic name 'Thomas' means. We have no idea why he was named that, other than the obvious possibility that he was one of twins. In that case, it makes me wonder what his clearly imagination-challenged parents named the other boy! We also learn from John that Thomas was

brave and loyal: when Jesus decided to return to Judaea because of Lazarus, Thomas' reaction was, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

But he missed that meeting today, and it was an important one! Jesus came and stood among the disciples there. He wished them peace, that eternal Shalom of the Father who sent him, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and sent them back out into the world, with no weapon or defence, only the authority to forgive. Thomas missed all that. His fellow disciples couldn't wait to tell him that they had seen Jesus. But Thomas was having none of it! He told them, "Unless I actually have physical proof, can see the nail marks and feel his wounds, I won't believe what you're saying!"

If we have seen one thing in John's Gospel, it is that John's Jesus likes people who push back, people who act like his mother did at the wedding feast when she pushed him to help with the wine, or the woman at the well in Samaria who pushed him with questions that had a sting in them about the coming Messiah or the Temple. So the sequel to Thomas' story comes as no surprise to us! Jesus returned to the same place a week later, once again wished the gathered disciples God's peace, and then turned his attention to Thomas. He offered the sensory evidence Thomas longed for, both sight and touch.

This is actually part of a pattern in John's gospel. When Jesus spoke to his first disciples for the first time, he invited them to come and see, to follow him to his home and visit him there. To Thomas he offers an even more intimate invitation, because touch is involved, and he says, "Do not doubt, but believe." In our reading from the first letter of John, three of the five senses are also involved - what the elder and his fellow disciples are declaring in that letter is "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands".

So in both the letter and the gospel we are offered the kind of certainty that comes from the very physicality of the evidence John and his companions provide, evidence from those who have been in close touch with Jesus and his actions. And it is an oddly inclusive offer: those who cannot see still have the evidence of hearing, and vice versa. Those without sight or hearing can still have the evidence of touch. And each of these senses is involved in the evidence offered through the story to us, who are cut off from any such physical evidence, because Jesus has now returned to the Father who sent him.

Thomas does not just see the risen Jesus, he also hears him speak in invitation. And not only does he see and hear the risen Jesus, he accepts the invitation to touch. Why is that so important? There are clues in Jesus final remark to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And in what John the elder says in his letter, "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." The old proverb has it that "seeing is believing"; the gospels and apostolic letters remind us that our believing is based on the seeing and hearing and feeling of others.

What is important is not the particular thing someone hears or sees or feels, but the insight that comes from it, is based on it. This kind of insight inspired the first followers of Jesus and brought them to trust in Jesus. It brought them into fellowship with one another too. When they told others about it, they created a relationship based on trust that brought those with whom the good news had been shared into their fellowship too. And that fellowship was not just between human beings, but included (and still includes) both Jesus himself and the Father who sent him. The German theologian Rudolph Bultmann wrote about this sensory experience and the insight that comes from it when he was opening up the meaning of the Prologue to John's

Gospel in his commentary. He reminded us that because of what the evangelists have done for us who come after, the words "we have seen his glory" are not spoken by a limited number of eye-witnesses in the past. Rather, because there were once believing eye-witnesses, all believers now share in a fellowship that allows us to say "we have seen his glory".

According to John, he and others have shared what they saw and heard and felt, and what others in their community saw and heard and felt, so that everyone they shared it with could become part of that community of believers, that fellowship with one another and with Jesus and the Father. And in the story of Thomas John also tells us that people like us, people who have to rely on the experience of others, relayed to us by apostles and evangelists, are blessed - we are the ones who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

What are we to do with the fellowship that we gain by the relationship of trust that we have built with one another and with Jesus and Jesus' Father? Clearly we are not to keep it to ourselves! That is not what our forebears in faith, like Mary and the other women at the tomb or John and his fellow witnesses, did - if they had, none of us would be here celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus with one another. They made their experiences available to others, shared them with other seekers and the purely curious, told their stories, and wrote them down for later audiences, like us. That's the point, or one of the points, of the story of Thomas. When he challenged the story the other disciples told him about Jesus' resurrection, he provided the opportunity for further and deeper witness to that resurrection, a further and deeper witness that triggered his belief and that of many other over the centuries as they and we have read about it in John's Gospel. So we should be striving to increase our fellowship, grow our community, so that more people will have the chance to hear the good news preached and be part of our sacramental life.

But there's more than that. Both the gospel excerpt and the letter passage speak about life. The Gospel says that through our trust in who Jesus is, the Messiah and Son of God, we can have life in his name. The letter of John tells us about the life that has been revealed. This life has amazing qualities, involving light and freedom from darkness and sin, that sense of hurt that pursues us and leaves us vulnerable to envy and hate, makes us complicit in betrayal and injustice like the betrayal and injustice of Good Friday. When we choose to believe in Jesus and trust him, we open ourselves to the light and life that free us from all that wrongness. This is the new life that comes with our fellowship with Jesus and his Father.

The community of believers described in the excerpt from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard this morning in place of an Old Testament Lesson had that new life. Because of it they chose to live in a way that cared for everyone. There was not a needy person among them, Acts tells us. Most scholars think that the earliest church was not perfect, and that Luke was painting a picture of an ideal community. If so, it's an ideal we are called to live up to! Trying to live up to that ideal underlies most of what we do, from keeping the lights on in this building that serves so many needs to building programmes that make us better disciples of Jesus. It's what the budget we pass each year at Vestry is really all about.

The Easter promise is that the life that Jesus entered through his Resurrection is there for us too, a life of light and forgiveness, of fellowship with our siblings in Christ, with the Father and with the Risen Jesus, and with the Spirit breathed out once for all on the disciples. But there is an Easter challenge as well. Thomas did not have sufficient faith in his fellow disciples to believe their witness to Jesus' resurrection. We do not have that luxury. We have to rely on what others tell us. Yet Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we have faith without such direct

evidence. Our challenge is to believe our forebears in the faith, to have trust in that life and light, to believe that fellowship is ours to share. God grant us that faith and trust! Amen.