



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 2.14a,22-32

John 20.19-31

I am sure you have all watched that wonderful and moving programme, 'The Repair Shop,' where treasured but damaged objects are brought back to life by a team of experts. It is not just about money, in fact it rarely is. These objects are of great human value and what links them in almost all cases is love. My favourite experts are brother and sister team Susie and Steve Fletcher, Susie is a master saddler and deals with all things leather, Steve is a horologist. I have often wondered what the Teddy bear ladies would make of my bear who is 68 now and more thread than bear! I remember beginning a sermon with this at Clifton, the reason being I compared those first frightened and beloved disciples with the precious objects in need of restoration. That first Easter eve they were in bits, their lives had been destroyed. They had followed Jesus faithfully throughout his three years of ministry, they had such high hopes. They believed in him, thinking of the wonders they had seen him perform, and Peter's, 'You are the Messiah the Son of the living God.' They had been a part of that wonderful and triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All seemed on a high, 'Hosanna to the Son of David, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' as 'the city went wild with excitement'. The events of that week had turned their lives upside down, Peter was still smarting from his denial of his Lord, and Jesus had been given a mock trial and executed in a vile way. Everything must have seemed at an end. They were broken. How could these shadows of their former selves take Jesus' message to the world? It is doubtful they even really understood it. Then suddenly on the first day of the week Mary had brought them news, John and Peter had seen the empty tomb. They had not seen Jesus. We are told, John 'believed'; what exactly he believed we are not told. It is Mary Magdalene who rushes to tell them, 'I have seen the Lord.' I wonder what they thought, did they believe her? We are not told, St. John's account goes straight to the evening, verse 19 begins,

¹⁹ '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,' (John 20)

So here they are huddled together in the house, maybe the one where Jesus had shared the Last Supper with them. They appear desolate, they are afraid of the Jews, of course they are. These are men in hiding. Were they thinking about what might happen to them, was Peter still wishing he could turn the clock back and stand up for his Lord? It is a sorry scene. These precious people, those to whom Jesus has entrusted the good news, are sadly in need of restoration, of his healing touch. Suddenly once more everything is turned upside down. This earth shattering event is told with such simplicity,

‘Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’

Notice those first words; Jesus restores them with the word of ‘Peace,’ just as he restores Mary by calling her by her name. That one word ‘Mary’ changes everything. The peace that Jesus gives is more than the normal Jewish greeting of Shalom, though that means deep peace. This is the completely healing, restoring peace of God. It makes them whole again. It is Jesus, Lord and God who has spoken this word, he has risen, he is alive, and death has been broken. Once again Jesus speaks that word of peace,

²⁰ ‘After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.’

This time he gives them proof, I wonder why they need it, their risen Lord is standing before them, he has appeared in a locked room. Is it evidence of the resurrection body of Jesus being somehow different or is it simply a confirmation, a showing of evidence? No doubt some of them can hardly credit what they are witnessing. But it is vital they understand he is no ghost, he is real, he is alive, and he has conquered death. Later they will understand fully the significance for humankind of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For now it is important that they see him and his peace restores them. What Jesus does next is vital.

‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’

Jesus breathes on them and gives the Holy Spirit to them, the life giving Spirit of God. References to the breath of life are numerous and so important in the bible. This is from Ezekiel 37,

⁹ ‘Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God;: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’

Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Such a short sentence but such a huge thing has happened. It is really; ‘breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ The disciples have received the Holy Spirit. Think of their task, a few poor men sent out to bring the good news to all people. Sent out to continue the work Jesus began. Could the broken and cowering men from a few minutes ago have achieved anything? Of course not but, as with Mary, in an instant their world is transformed, they are transformed. They are strong with Jesus’ strength. Then he gave them their commission "As the Father has sent me so I send you," It is because the Holy Spirit is within them that they will fling open the locked doors and proclaim the risen Lord.

²⁴ ‘But Thomas (who was called the Twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵ 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.’

So often in the bible, and specifically the gospel accounts, we have portraits of real people with real strengths and weaknesses, they act as we would act and think as we would do. It is all so real, so

natural, so it is with Thomas. Poor Thomas stuck with the tag 'Doubting' for all eternity. It behoves us to ask ourselves what we would have done. Thomas was a realist; he knew all about crucifixion, he knew Jesus was dead and buried. He must have been bitter that all his hopes had been destroyed. He was remember, one of Jesus' most brave and loyal followers. It is Thomas who, when the news is brought to Jesus about Lazarus and Jesus decides to return to the danger area around Jerusalem, says,

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now the disciples give him the earth shattering news that their Lord is alive and they have seen him. He simply can't believe it. He should have had more faith and he is in need of restoration. So here we are on Easter 2, the week after the resurrection,

²⁶ '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.'

Once again we have the words of peace, these words and 'Do not be afraid,' are spoken so often by Jesus. Now Thomas is confronted with the risen Jesus. We can imagine how their eyes meet, and Jesus looks deep into his soul.

²⁷ '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.'

Jesus' words must have cut into Thomas as much as when the Lord turned to look at Peter in the courtyard, it is about their own feelings of unworthiness; Jesus gives only love and forgiveness.

Thomas' response is so similar to Peter's own moment of revelation when he confesses Jesus.

²⁸ 'Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

That is so important, Thomas doesn't simply see the risen Jesus as Messiah, he sees his God. It is one of the earliest confessions of Jesus as part of the Trinity and they are spoken by the one who doubted, who failed initially. His life is changed forever in that moment. What happened to him afterwards is not known for sure, tradition has it that he travelled widely proclaiming the good news, eventually reaching India. It is pretty certain that he was martyred for his faith. It is absolutely certain that his life had been transformed forever.

Jesus had breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Thomas had recognised Christ as God. We too confess our faith in Christ as God, echoing the affirmation that Thomas made to the risen Lord. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' This speaks directly to us and to Christians down the ages, we have not seen but we confess our faith in Jesus our God. At the Eucharist we receive the same Spirit and the same commission. 'As the Father has sent me so I send you.' When we say the words

"May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others and may we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world."

Our reading is from Acts and the rubric in the lectionary states that this must be one of the readings at all services. We will see why; Jesus is risen, we have seen the state of the disciples and Jesus' restorative power. They have been given their commission by him. Later this will be repeated at his ascension. In these wonderful verses,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28)

Here in our reading from Acts we see Peter living it out. No longer is he the fearful man hiding from the Jews, he is out in the street telling them straight. What has changed? Jesus has breathed on them the Holy Spirit and chapter 2 of Acts begins,

^{2.1} ‘When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.’

The Holy Spirit not only strengthens, it enlightens, it teaches. The scales fall from the eyes of those who received it and things are clear. Jesus died and by his death he defeated death and sin. He took away our sin and renewed our relationship with the God who loves us. By his resurrection he defeated death and won for us eternal life with him, and we will be part of God’s newly created order on earth. They are strengthened with God’s strength and go out in Jesus’ name.

As the disciples stand before the crowd they each hear them speaking in their own language. How can that be, these are simple Galileans, ordinary men not scholars? Yet they hear it. Some scoff and hearing only babble say they are drunk. Peter addresses them fearlessly and goes to the heart of the matter. He tells it like it is, a very dangerous thing to do.

²² ‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.’

You saw his signs, you saw his miracles, and you know he brought the dead to life in God’s name and through God’s power. He was the Messiah, the one for whom you have waited, the one to whom all the scriptures point. What did you do? You handed him over to evil men and they gave him to the Romans but you demanded his blood. You are guilty of it! Wow. At an ordination service the bishop asks the candidate various questions and the answer is, ‘With the help of God we will.’ In our own strength we can’t, with Jesus, in God’s strength we can. So it is with Peter. As he makes clear, Jesus was killed, he was buried but that is not the end of the story, God raised him from the dead, and he has poured out his Holy Spirit on us so we address you now.

Peter seeks to show that the scriptures pointed to Jesus, the prophecies pointed to this moment in history. So he quotes from the Psalms of David, David their greatest King and the servant of God.

‘David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,

for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;

²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;

moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,

or let your Holy One experience corruption.

²⁸ You have made known to me the ways of life;

you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

Here David is talking about the ‘Holy One’ who will not stay in the grave, whom will in fact be raised by God. Peter makes it clear that David was not talking about himself. How could he be, says Peter; David died, he was buried and they have his tomb to this day. No, David is referring to someone else, the ‘Holy one,’ the Messiah, God’s Son. He will be raised from the dead! God told David that a direct descendant of his would be the Messiah and would ‘sit upon his throne.’ So David is speaking of the risen Jesus, Son of David, Messiah and God.

³² 'This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.'

Peter emphasises that they are witnesses of that wonderful event. They have seen the empty tomb, they have met with the risen Lord, they have been with him, eaten with him. The wonderful truth of the resurrection was foretold by David. This is the beginning of God's new age. The risen Jesus was no Spirit; he was alive, bodily alive. Jesus, by his resurrection has won new life for all. There will indeed be a bodily resurrection for all believers and Jesus is the 'first fruits from the dead.'

This is the wonderful message and Peter has received Jesus's commission to proclaim it! We all carry that responsibility. We have received God's Holy Spirit and we are commissioned to go out into the world in Jesus' name.

Jesus is Lord! God sends his Holy Spirit to show by works of power that Jesus is Lord. David J Mansell

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