Sermon for 2nd of Easter Year C

Readings: Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

i

Doubting Thomas had faith in Jesus. He believed him to be the Messiah of Israel. He believed him to be a worker of miracles and a healer of the sick. Yet clearly there was something missing.

In John 11.16 when Jesus first decided to go back across the Jordan to Jerusalem, the messenger that Martha and Mary had sent to bring Jesus quickly to help their dying brother, Lazarus, might have been relieved, but Thomas assumed they would all die. Thomas was at least willing to die alongside Jesus, or so he hoped, but he expected the worst.

When Jesus said he assumed that the disciples did know the way to their heavenly Father’s house, that is, knew their way beyond death to their eternal home, Thomas was the one who declared that he didn’t (John 14.5).

So it is hardly surprising that when he misses the first resurrection appearance, he is unable to believe that Jesus has risen despite the claims of all his friends, until confronted by the Risen Christ himself.

So of all the things Thomas did believe about Jesus, the one belief that made all the difference was belief that Jesus had risen. The Church without the Easter faith has no Gospel to tell. It is the Resurrection alone that validates all the other things Thomas believed about Jesus. Without the Resurrection, Jesus was still a great teacher, a healer of the sick and an inspiration to many, a slaughtered hero, an oppressed revolutionary, but he was not the only Son of God, and the Saviour of the world.

To make sense of Jesus you must have the Resurrection as well as his life and death.

Catholics speak of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. This is an unfamiliar phrase to Methodists, but it means precisely this: the Jesus we know today is known still as the dying Christ who takes away the sins of the world as well as the Risen and Ascended Christ. When Jesus rose from the dead, he didn’t leave his wounds behind, but bore them still on his resurrected body.

The Paschal Mystery means that Jesus is the crucified One as well as the resurrected One. Whilst the Catholic Mass emphasises the sacrificial death of Christ, the Methodist Eucharist emphasises the victorious, risen and ascended Christ. Both Protestant and Catholic rites contain both aspects, but there has been a differing emphasis. The risen Jesus who stands before Thomas with his five wounds from the cross reminds us that we, like Thomas, need the life and death as well as the resurrection in order to make sense of Christ.

Christ the political revolutionary, Christ the moral philosopher, Christ the proto-communist just will not do. The Paschal Mystery demands we have the full picture to comprehend the meaning of Christ.

ii

This moment in the Upper Room is a moment of transition. The disciples become the apostles. Those who learn (disciples), become the ones who are sent (apostles).

Of course, we all continue to learn for ever, such is the mystery of God; but you get the point. Just as the angel barred the way for Adam and Eve to return to the Garden in Genesis 3, so too the angels bar the way to anyone wishing to take refuge in the empty tomb. There is only one way to go – and that is forward.

The disciples could not gather around their memories of Jesus as they had known him. They could not comfort one another with stories of his healings or accounts of his debates with the Pharisees. They could not stay with the dead Jesus. They had to go as apostles to face the world led by the risen Christ himself.

Our second reading today from Acts 5:27-32 shows us that the disciples took up that challenge to become apostles.

Our reading from John 20:19-31 opened with the disciples hiding behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. Acts 5 has them defiantly standing up to those very same authorities that condemned Jesus to death. What has happened between those two days? The resurrection has.

In Acts 5 we see that opposition to the Gospel is coming primarily from the Temple authorities, focussed on the high priest and the Sadducees. The common people seem to be willing to embrace the Gospel in large numbers, up to 3,000 converts at a time. Even the authorities admit that their teaching had “spread all over Jerusalem”.

The first thing mentioned in Peter’s speech about Jesus, is that God has raised him from the dead –because that is the crucial truth that changes everything. Jesus has been raised by the very same God as their ancestors followed – so the Gospel is part of Israel’s unfolding story – but the high priest and officials fail to see it.

Peter then mentions the crucifixion and the ascension of Christ. Again – this encompasses the Paschal Mystery – it is the full story of Jesus. Without the full story, people will misjudge who Jesus is – as the high priest and religious leaders have done. The Sadducees refused to believe resurrection was possible because they found no reference to it in the Books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy), whilst the High Priest could only envisage resurrection as a future hope at the end of the world. A risen Jesus whom he has just had executed didn’t make sense to him.

Note how Trinitarian the Gospel is from the earliest of sermons. God has raised Jesus, placed Jesus at his right hand, with the result that Jesus is the Saviour through whom people find forgiveness of their sins and upon those who believe, God bestows the Holy Spirit. Our Trinitarian creeds were produced to help summarize the faith for Constantine’s empire and enable its conversion *en masse* some 300 years later – but the teaching itself is here before our eyes in Peter’s speech.

It is this Trinitarian faith that Peter and the apostles take to the world.

iii

Our reading from John is no less Trinitarian. Jesus says: “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. Then he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21-22).

Many of us prefer the chronology of St Luke who conveniently and helpfully separates Easter from Pentecost, allowing us to celebrate the two events and give full weight to both. St John, however, appears to combine the two.

Whether John’s chronology is right or Luke’s is right, the theology of John is spot on.

Those who are transformed from disciples to apostles are changed so dramatically only through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Spirit that brings forth the paean of praise from Thomas’ lips, “My Lord and my God.” It is the power of the Spirit that emboldens the apostles before the high priest and the Sanhedrin.

It is through the gift of the Spirit that anyone proclaims Christ as Lord.

Yet there is a cautionary note to the wonderful news of Easter. We need to share the same Spirit as Jesus because we are also to share the same fate.

Yes, that does mean, ultimately, resurrection and ascension into God’s very presence. But it also means rejection, mockery, imprisonment, pain, torture and even death. That might not be so for any given individual Christian, but collectively it is true for the Church.

The apostles might have left the Sanhedrin after Gamaliel’s intervention and a whipping in high spirits; according to Acts 5:41 they were happy to have been found worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

If they thought a whipping was the sum total of their suffering, they still had a lot to learn. But with unassailable faith in the resurrection and strengthened by the same Spirit that strengthened Christ himself, the apostles are able to withstand any of the many barbarous acts of torture and death that they will meet in the years ahead.

As the Christians of Nigeria, Pakistan and Iraq and elsewhere attest today, that same Spirit courses in our blood to enable us to be apostles today in the face of the high priests of various faiths and philosophies which stand against us.

All this is possible, and only possible, because of the resurrection of Jesus and the breath of his Spirit.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**2015**