

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Easter (Year C) 24th April 2022

At the end of today's Gospel reading, St John tells us why he has shared with us the story of Jesus Christ, and above all why he has told us the story of his rising from the dead: so that we may have life through his name. St John wants to lead us to eternal life – which is not some future promise, a reward way down the line for people who are good now. Eternal life is not something put off into the future, it is about how we live now, a way of living that is full of life, full of life that will never be extinguished, full of life that is infectious and contagious. Look at the story in the First Reading – St Peter walks through the streets of Jerusalem and he is SO alive, SO overflowing with eternal life, that wherever he walks eternal life just bubbles out from him and falls all around him, healing the people who are lucky enough to be close to him. St Peter is completely full, overfull, of eternal life and he drops it all around him.

In telling the story of the first Easter evening, St John introduces us to this sort of lively living. First of all, there is St Thomas. He is not there when the risen Jesus appears, and he later says 'I refuse to believe'. This is not really doubt, this is rebellion. 'I refuse' – that is, 'I choose not to, I rebel'. This attitude of rebellion is far more common in us all than we would care to accept. I will not listen to the things God tells me which are inconvenient to me; I will not allow him into absolutely every part of my life; I will practise my faith when it is convenient to me, but not when it disrupts my comfortable existence; I will ignore the bits of divine truth that make me stand out from the crowd; I will stay close to the people who are like me, but keep my distance from the ones I find distasteful; I will not surrender every bit of anger, or resentment within me; I rebel. We are perhaps happy to say 'Take me Lord, I am yours', but under our breath we are muttering 'just do not touch this part of me, and this, and this'. And the trouble with being rebellious in this way is that it is sterile and unproductive. It prevents us from being channels of the love and mercy of God, and so for a wasted week St Thomas can do nothing beautiful, until he finally lets go of his rebellion and hands over everything to God. This unlocks eternal life, unlocks the fullest sort of living, and he can take his place among all the apostles once more.

There is one thing, however, that Thomas does get right. He can see that the wounds are the key. Back on Holy Thursday I was talking to you about hands and feet, and here they are again. The wounds of the risen Lord are crucial, and Thomas does at least understand that – his rebellion is not complete, wounds could overpower it. The hands that washed his feet are now torn and battered. When the risen Lord appears to the disciples (minus Thomas) he says 'Peace be with you' and then he shows them his wounds. Peace and his wounds are inextricably linked, the words and the gesture go together, like 'I baptise you' and the pouring of water. There is no peace without the wounds, but they are wounds redeemed, wounds overcome, wounds disempowered. It would, of course, have been perfectly possible for the Father to raise Christ from the dead and, as he did so, to erase his wounds as if they had never been there, but he does not do that. When we are hurt, or damaged; when life (or, quite frankly, other people) injure us deeply, we know that those wounds will not disappear. They can be robbed of their power, but they will not just disappear as if nothing had happened, and this is why the Risen Jesus still carries his wounds. He will always be wounded, until the end of time. But what the resurrection

of the wounded Jesus tells us is this, and it is a message of great importance: we are not defined, not identified, by what people have done to us. We are cut, and bruised, and battered and scarred by all the hurts and damage that people have thrown at us, but if we choose to grab hold of the resurrection of Christ, if we choose to hold tight to the lively way of life that the Gospels show us, then all those scars and wounds are secondary. They are signs that we have not been overwhelmed, but God has triumphed in us. We do not need to be defined by what people have done to us, we do not need to be belittled and reduced by how they have hurt us. We can choose a more lively and life-giving way. We can, in short, rise once more as Jesus rose again.

Thomas could, I suppose, have maintained his rebellion. He could have clung onto his identity as 'the one who missed the resurrection', but thankfully he didn't. He remains wounded, injured by his reaction to missing that first appearance, injured by his own rebellion, but that injury does not identify who he is any more. First of all he is an Apostle, and that is what really matters. He does carry the self-inflicted scar of his own rebelliousness (don't most of us?) but the scar is now a sort of trophy, a reminder that he has risen again from the low place his rebellion took him, and now he has taken his place with the others, walking through the streets full of the sinner and the wounded, the sick and the worried, the angry and the sad, and as he walks there falls from him, like dust from a traveller's cloak, the strange and beautiful healing mercy of God.

So eternal life, the fullest sort of life, is not waiting far off in the future for us. We can begin it now. And we do not need to let ourselves be defined by what other people have done to us (or even by what we have done to ourselves). We can rise again. And if we leave behind us our rebelliousness, as Thomas so wisely did, there is a chance that we, too can become the instruments of God's healing and mercy, spreading it around us wherever we go. What an Easter blessing that would be!