

## Fr Peter's Message for the Second Sunday of Easter 2020

Well, this is something that I wouldn't be able to do with you in the normal world. Preaching a Sunday homily doesn't give you the chance to take the congregation on a field trip, but here I am in the churchyard at Duncton. It is good to be here, of course, because this is the only one of our churches that I haven't recorded a video from so far during this crisis. Also, of course, it is a stunningly beautiful place, and it is the resting place of so many people I have known and loved. I must have buried 60 or 70 people here since I arrived here, so many people to remember. There is Gill, who was buried just before the restrictions really came into force; there are endless priests, mainly Jesuits but also a dear old friend Fr Dominic Rolls. This is the last resting place of my own parents, too. It is full of stories. But all that is not the reason I have brought you here today. I have brought you here, to this graveyard, today so that we don't forget that the great story which we are celebrating, the Easter story, begins at a grave. As we continue our way through the 50 days of Easter, listening to the stories of the ways in which the Risen Lord appears to his friends, it is easy to get so caught up in the happy tales of unexpected meetings that we forget none of this would have happened but for a death, a real death, and a dead body laid in a tomb.

The world before Easter was another world, totally different from the world after Easter. That was the world where the dead were not raised. Oh yes there was Lazarus, raised by Jesus, another of his miracles. But he is gone now, isn't he? Without the miracle-man where can there be miracles? But now the apostles have realised that they are living in a new world. Everything has shifted. Death is not what they thought it was, because Jesus has destroyed its power. Death is not destruction, it is a change: this risen Lord is the same person, but different, so filled with grace and power that at first sight some people do not even recognise him.

For Thomas, things are different. Unlike the other apostles he was not there when the risen Jesus first appeared. They now live in a world where death is not final, and the dead rise to a new life; Thomas still lives in the old world, the world where death is triumphant, where the arrogant power of death can imagine no defeat. He does not say to them that he cannot believe the Lord is risen: cannot, the tired get-out of the rationalist who is so imprisoned by the limitations of their own mind that they cannot believe anything can exist beyond their understanding. No, Thomas refuses to believe. He will not, not he cannot. It is too big a leap from the old world of before Easter into the new world of after Easter. But it doesn't take much to make him change his mind: one sight of the risen Lord, and the first word from his mouth, and Thomas is moved on into the new world that his friends already inhabit.

To start with Thomas sees the world in a completely different way from the other apostles, because what he thinks about death and what they think about death are totally different. The ever-wise Dag Hammarskjöld wrote: 'In the last analysis it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions life puts to us' (Markings). And that, really, is why we are in a graveyard this morning. Being here forces every one of us to ask ourselves, what do I really think about death? Every single one of us is going to end up here one day, or somewhere very like it. In this time, by which I mean Easter time but also the Covid-19 pandemic time, death is very much before us. It is difficult for us to get away from it. That can be a bit scary, and leave us

looking all around for a way out, for a way to avoid thinking about this, to avoid confronting our own mortality, our own fragility. Let's not do that. Let's resist that temptation, and let's have the courage instead to embrace our own mortality. Whatever other people may think, as Christians we have an extraordinary gift: we know that death is not the end. If we are going to be true to our faith, true to the Easter message of hope, we need to embrace that fact and make it one of the things that governs how we live. Of course death is frightening. My death is a frightening thing to think about, and the death of the people that I love is even more scary to contemplate. But death is not the end, it really isn't. If you see death as a gateway to completeness, to the place where all at last is clear, where everything makes sense at last and fits into place; if you see death as a final healing, a healing of all our hurts, our failures, our inadequacies, our foolish pride and our arrogant self-importance; if you see your death not as a cruel interruption of a story unfinished, but as celebratory full stop at the end of Part 1, before the glorious revelation of Part 2 begins, then you will see all of life differently. Of course, there are many sad partings and cruel, painful bereavements: inexplicably short lives that make our souls rebel. But it's your death you need to think about, as I need to think about mine, that is the work of the heart that can bear fruit. The eulogy to be spoken over your remains is not yet written; it may be many years away, or only days, we cannot know. But the life that will be remembered, that is in your control, that life is written in the decisions you make from day to day.

Mortality is a gift. It obliges us to realise we cannot put off living well indefinitely. There are only so many chances left to each of us to live the kind of life we know God made us for. Don't let's waste them. Mortality is a gift, because it is the only really practical way to prepare for eternal life. 'In the last analysis it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions life puts to us'. Life has many more questions to ask you. To prepare to answer them where better to start than at a tomb. That's where the Easter story all begins. What do you really believe about death? Even if you have never really thought about it, you do believe something, and what that is will affect everything important that you do in life. Thomas discovered the truth. Have you?