

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 27th April 2025, Easter 2

Readings: **Acts 5:27-32**

Revelation 1:4-8

Psalms 118:14-29

John 20:19-31

After the symbols and stories of Holy Week and the joyful celebration of the resurrection last Sunday, we may be tempted to think... *'Well, that's Easter done and dusted for another year!'* We've remembered the foot-washing, the last supper, the call to love one another, the crucifixion, the burial, and the resurrection so, now it's back to normal.

Happily, the compilers of the Lectionary, the people who choose the readings for us to use each time we gather for worship, don't allow us to forget the significance of the resurrection. In the Sunday Gospel readings after Easter we will keep hearing about Jesus appearing to his disciples, and in readings from the book of Acts we will hear about the disciples bearing witness to this.

In today's reading from John's Gospel, I'd like to focus on the initial greeting from Jesus to the disciples, and the later response from Jesus to Thomas.

The Gospel tells us that the disciples were together, and that they were frightened. The body of Jesus had disappeared. Mary Magdalene had told them that she had met Jesus and that he had, astonishingly, risen from the dead. The Roman and Jewish authorities were looking for the followers of Jesus thinking that they had stolen his body. Consequently, the doors of the house where the disciples were staying were locked, and these men were confused and afraid.

Among them I wonder how the disciple Peter was feeling? Peter who had promised to be faithful even if it meant death. Peter who had denied knowing Jesus three times when questioned outside the house of Caiaphas before disappearing into the crowd.

Suddenly, without warning, without doors been unlocked and opened... Jesus stood among them! He looked at them and did not say, 'What happened to you? Why did you run away?' And, he did not single out Peter and say, 'I told you that you'd deny me.' Instead, he offered the greeting that Jewish people exchange to this day – 'Shalom elecha!' which means, 'Peace be with you!' In some ways the English word 'peace' is an inadequate translation because 'Shalom' is a form of blessing that hopes everything in the life of the person or people being addressed is going well enough for them to feel at peace.

There was no condemnation from Jesus; no sarcasm, and no irony... but, rather a blessing, “Peace be with you.” In our Anglican liturgy we echo these words before exchanging a similar greeting. We affirm that, “We are the Body of Christ!” and respond, “His Spirit is with us!” We affirm, “The Peace of the Lord be always with you!” and respond, “And also with you.”

I think there is significant challenge for us in this, for when people do the wrong thing by us do we pray for them to be blessed by God, or do we curse them? Do we wish for them to flourish, or do we wish for them to fail? I think it is an easy thing for us to accept God’s peace for ourselves, but hard for us to pray that it also be known by those we don’t like. How can we possibly do this when it is so contrary to our human nature?

The Gospel then describing Jesus breathing on the disciples saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit...’ In this we are reminded that we are not left on our own, and that have each been breathed upon, and have received the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to do things that God would have us do and who transforms us to become more like Christ. Let us take a moment now to breathe deeply and be reminded of God’s gift of life, and of the Holy Spirit at work within each of our lives.

The disciple Thomas was not present in that locked room, and he didn’t believe his friends when they told him what had happened. ‘Unless I see for myse I’m not going to believe’, he said. It’s not that he didn’t want to believe, but someone risen from the dead and talking with people seemed impossible. I think most of the Western world today, with our world view so informed by scientific theory and critical thinking, would be with Thomas. I don’t believe it until I see it; until you prove it to me; and until there is enough evidence!

The Gospel tells us that one week later Jesus appeared again to the disciples and this time Thomas was there. So, there was a long week for Thomas of doubting and struggling to believe, before Jesus made himself known. I think that is helpful for us in our journeys of faith there are times when we struggle to believe; when God feels far away; when our spiritual life seems dry and... we doubt.

In the midst of that Jesus met Thomas and assured him that he was real, that he had returned to life, and that what the other disciples were talking about was true. In the midst of similar spaces today I think Jesus also meets us, in different ways, such that we again feel loved; we again feel that God is close to us; and the dryness is transformed into a sense of fellowship with God... and peace.

How do we pray when we think and feel like Thomas? I think there are helpful words in the ninth Chapter of Mark, verse 9, which describes a father whose son was plagued by terrible fits. In this the man is remembered saying to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”

When we come to church, I hope we each come with an expectation that God’s Spirit will meet us in the Word and give us something that will be a blessing in our ongoing journey of faith. But, I hope this also true when we pray and read the Bible at home away from church.

What has struck you in the Gospel reading and reflection today? Is it in the greeting of peace that Jesus offered to the disciples, or in the way that Jesus made himself known to Thomas in the midst of his doubting? What has resonated with you, challenged you, or encouraged you? and, why do you think that is?

Let’s close in prayer:

Loving God, thank you for Jesus, and for the difference that he makes to each one of our lives. Thank you for the work of your Spirit and the blessing of your Word.

Please help us to know more deeply the peace that comes from you, and to share your peace with others.

Help us to be people who bring our doubts and questions about life to you, and to recognise you in the midst of our living.

We pray in the name of the one who said, ‘I will be with you always’
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.