

Sermon 19 April 2020

Our readings today are all about being witnesses. Witnesses to God's saving grace, protection, hope, peace and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The purpose of this witness by the apostles was so that we "may come to believe" (John 20: 31) and our witness is in turn given so that others "may come to believe" (John 20: 31).

In Acts, the apostles teach in the name of Jesus, telling how God raised Jesus from the dead for the forgiveness of sins and that Jesus' ministry continues through his followers, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Here Peter publicly declares (among other things) Jesus' resurrection and reign at God's right hand. This text forms part of the sermon he gave on the day of Pentecost, showing that Jesus' resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit are integrally related. We see this same close connection between Jesus' resurrection and the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel where Jesus appears to a group of his followers, after his resurrection, in the locked room, offering them him peace and breathing on them.

The psalm is a witness of trust and security in God. It conveys a message of reassurance in difficult times and lifts us up when we are weighed down by sorrow and fear; times when we struggle to live in hope against the pain of our circumstances; our suffering. And this is particularly relevant to us in the times we are living in now. Many are hungry – not knowing where their next meal is coming from, worried about employment and income– will they still have jobs after the lockdown, worried about their homes – will there be money to pay the rent/bond? It is at times such as these; in the midst of sorrow, worry, fear and suffering that we are reminded by the psalmist to practice praying: "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge." (Psalm 16: 1)

The reading from 1 Peter is a witness to a living hope - "A new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1: 3). The writer rejoices and says that God has given them an inheritance that endures. He says that despite their current suffering - no matter what they are going through - God can be counted on, not only to rescue them in the future, but to give them joy and hope, here and now, in the midst of their suffering. "How we endure, how we behave and act during testing times, he writes, is what proves and refines our faith." (Dr Elizabeth Perry, Anglican Alliance, London) This message is true for us today. Yes, we are frustrated, fearful, concerned and worried about COVID-19. Its impact on our lives now as well in the future. But we have a living hope that we can rejoice in – the risen Christ. Christ is our example and we see this in the Gospel reading where we meet the resurrected Jesus who, as Elizabeth Perry says, still bears the evidence of his suffering; the marks of crucifixion. "He has gone through suffering and death and he carries their scars into the new reality." (Dr Elizabeth Perry, Anglican Alliance, London)

This familiar passage from John's Gospel is one that is set every year as the reading for this second Sunday of Easter and it is often referred to as doubting Thomas. Yet when we read the Gospels, we see that Thomas was not the only one who did not believe at first. In Matthew, Mark and Luke (Matthew 28:17; Mark 16: 11, 13, 14; Luke 24:11; 37-41) we see from the time of the empty tomb being discovered that all the apostles, except the beloved Disciple, did not believe or had difficulty believing

that Jesus was risen. In John's Gospel, we are told that the beloved disciple believes upon seeing the empty tomb (v. 8). Mary believes when the Lord calls her name (v. 16). The disciples must see the risen Lord (v. 20) and Thomas says that he must touch Jesus' wounds (v. 25) or he will not believe. Yet when Jesus invites Thomas to touch, we are not told that he does, (v28) it seems as if just seeing Jesus is enough for the risen Christ to become a reality for him.

I think it is important to note that all the disciples struggled to understand what happened. And it was only when they were sure about what they had witnessed that they could then go out and witness to others. Sometimes, we too experience things that are traumatic, confusing, not easily explained or understood and we respond with a sense of disbelief. So we need not feel bad about ourselves if we have questions and struggle with issues of faith. Doubt or unbelief is something we are all prone to at some time or other in our lives and it is not necessarily a bad thing. When we doubt we are forced to ask honest questions. Doubt causes us to struggle with the issue at hand, to confront it, and to grow in understanding. It keeps us humble, preventing us from being arrogant and intolerant. It keeps us real and truthful. There is no absolute certainty about many things in life, and particularly about spiritual things. If there were absolute certainty then faith would not be necessary because faith is trust, not certainty.

When we take a closer look at the Gospel passage, we see in verses 19-23 Jesus appears to the disciples who are locked behind closed doors for "fear of the Jews." Who are these "Jews"? They are in fact the authorities who opposed Jesus because his teaching was different to theirs and in the end they had him crucified. Now that Jesus is dead, the disciples probably think these Jews will come after them. They allow their fear of men to get the better of them. It is in this context that Jesus now appears to them and says "Peace be with you"; he then showed them his hands and side and said "Peace be with you" a second time. It is only after Jesus shows them his hands and side that they recognise him and "rejoice" that they see him. Then he breathes on them and says to them "Receive the Holy Spirit." He further gives them authority to forgive sins. You see it is by Christ's resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit that the disciples, and us, are able to have peace and to extend forgiveness to those around us. We are thus able to be witnesses for Christ when we are able to be forgiving, rather than fearing others. For it is in receiving peace that we receive forgiveness and in giving peace that we offer forgiveness.

Just look at the difference in the disciples' behaviour - here they are scared and locked behind closed doors. Compare this with the reading from Acts – they are bold, not scared to face the authorities and preach the risen Christ. Why is that? Well they have seen the risen Christ and have received his peace and the Holy Spirit. Their lives have changed and they cannot help themselves but go out and tell others about this Jesus who God raised from the dead; Jesus who loves us and forgives us our sins. They believed it and now they communicate it – they are witnesses.

Dear people of God let us remember that firstly Jesus' wounds helped the apostles recognize him and secondly they were the signs of Jesus' love for them (and us). It is

through his wounds that Jesus witnessed to his followers. Let us not hide our wounds. Instead let them be signs of our new birth and living hope in the risen Christ. Let us continue to reach out to others giving them hope and the joy of believing as so many of you are doing, during this difficult and uncertain time of COVID-19, through your prayers and actions in seeing to the needs of others. Thank you for your witness to Christ's love in the work you are doing.

Mark S Burrows, in *The Upper Room Disciplines* 2020, writes "If the resurrection is to mean anything in our lives, it must be this: The call to live beyond the narrow logic of fear, selfishness and hatred, to live into the "new ways of life" that constitute the generous truths of God among us."

As we reflect on the readings and our situation may we receive Christ's peace and Holy Spirit anew as we continue to seek "new ways of life" both now during lockdown and in the future - post-lockdown. May our lives bear joyful witness to the risen Christ who loves us.

Amen