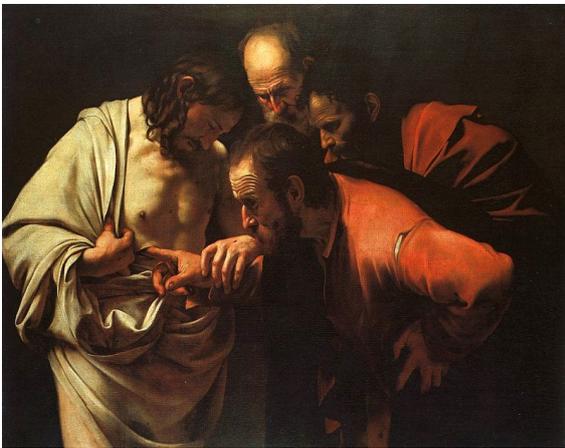


We begin another three weeks of lockdown. The novelty of the first three weeks is wearing off and our confinement will undoubtedly become more difficult to face. We are mindful of those whose confinement conditions so far have brought additional stress, ill health or even domestic abuse. Let us remember those less fortunate than ourselves.

Today is called Low Sunday. It may be so called because it follows the exuberance and uplifting celebrations of Easter Sunday. In the Eastern



Orthodox tradition today is known as Thomas Sunday. In the night, under the cover of darkness, on the first day of the week and behind locked doors, Jesus came and stood among the disciples.

He said, 'Peace be with you.' He showed them His torn hands and pierced side. On that first evening of the Resurrection, Thomas was not with the disciples; he was not in the room when Jesus appeared. Later, when the disciples tell him of their experience, Thomas said, 'Unless I see....I will not believe.' One week later, again the disciples gathered under the cover of darkness in a house behind locked doors. This time

Thomas was with them. Jesus appeared in their midst with the same greeting, 'Peace be with you.' Jesus spoke directly to Thomas: 'Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side.' Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God!' Much of our daily life now is lived behind locked doors *for fear of the virus*. In our Gospel lesson, the first disciples were hidden away behind locked doors *for fear of the authorities*. It was in their 'lockdown' that they encountered the Risen Christ.

When first we think of the disciple Thomas we think of the doubter, but the Gospels suggest that there is more to the man than this. A few days before the triumphal entry, Jesus and His disciples had narrowly escaped being stoned by a crowd in Jerusalem. Then came the appeal from Mary and Martha to Jesus to go to Bethany because their brother Lazarus was dying. The village of Bethany was not far from the walls of the Holy City. When the appeal came, the disciples protested that it was too dangerous; they would risk being captured and that would mean certain death. Realising that Jesus was determined to go to Lazarus, Thomas alone said, 'Let us go also, that we may die with Him.'

On the night before He died, seated with His disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus said, 'In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.....You know the place where I am going.' Many of the disciples may have wondered what Jesus meant, but it was

Thomas who asked Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Unjustly discarded as a doubter, Thomas is a man of courage and inquiry. It seems to me that he cared deeply about Jesus. It is possible that the sole reason that Thomas was not with the disciples on that first night was because, in grief, he could not face being with them. Overwhelmed by the brutality of the crucifixion, by the traumatic loss of a such a friend, teacher and confidant, Thomas simply could not face anyone. Courage, spiritual searching and bereavement make Thomas a disciple with whom we can readily identify.

At evening, under the cover of darkness, Jesus ‘appeared’ to the disciples. The verb used for ‘appear’ is quite specific: it means an apparition, an inner vision. It is something that is experienced and ‘seen’ within the consciousness, in the mind and heart. The ‘appearance’ of Jesus that night in that room in Jerusalem could not have been recorded on an iPhone. There was nothing physical to see and the verb chosen by the writer tells us that. In his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul ‘saw’ Jesus, the Risen Christ, but what he saw was not seen by those who were with him. Paul described what he saw as similar to that experienced by the apostles. The ‘appearances’ are an inner experience, an intimate encounter with the Holy. Our Gospels are imaginative spiritual writing, not moment by moment history.

When Jesus appeared a second time to the disciples Thomas was present.

Following His word of peace, *Shalom*, Jesus said to Thomas: ‘Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. Thomas answered, ‘My Lord and my God.’ It is not clear if Thomas does touch Jesus but, if we enter the story for ourselves, the physicality and closeness of Jesus make His presence overpowering. Thomas said, ‘My Lord and my God.’

The declaration which is made by Thomas is an interesting one. Written towards the end of the first century, the Gospel of John has Thomas say, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Around that time, the Roman Emperor was Domitian, whose title was ‘Our Lord and God.’ It is possible that the evangelist is provocatively bringing into focus the competing value system of Jesus with that



of Rome. To say that ‘Jesus is Lord’ meant that Domitian is not; to say ‘Jesus is Lord’ is to make a stand for an altogether different kind of world, away from the violence and brutality of Rome to a kingdom in which all human beings are valued supremely.

In Jerusalem, under cover of darkness, in that room, the physicality of the Risen Christ, the bloody and broken body of Jesus, is no less potent in mediating the Presence of the Sacred. The ethereal vision is packed with physicality. If we

modernise the story, re-write it in the twentieth century, we could replace the Roman Empire with Hitler's Reich and the open wound of Jesus with a 'number indelibly printed on his arm, the number



given to Him in the concentration camp before being led to the gas chamber.’¹

What now does this story mean?

Standing before Thomas, Jesus pointed to the number. Thomas declared, ‘My Lord and my God.’ In his apparition, his inner vision, Thomas saw God in the darkest, cruellest place on Earth, in the intolerable suffering and violence of humanity. He ‘saw’ the Transcendent God of heaven there, the Wisdom of God, the Word made flesh: he ‘saw’ Him there. More than that, he felt God with him, utterly present to him. God is with us in our darkest suffering.

Like many people around the country, I am moved by the Archbishop of Canterbury's story about the death of his seven month old daughter, Johanna. Johanna was badly injured in a car crash in France; she died in intensive care five days after the accident. He says, 'It's a very rare day that I don't think of

¹ Ibid., 15

Johanna.' Over those five days, Justin and his wife, Caroline, prayed deeply.

He said:

That was prayer at its rawest because it's just prayer of,
Oh God help. Oh God, where are you? What's going on?
Are you going to do something or aren't you?

He said:

I suppose the deepest moment was when we were in a café
actually outside the hospital on the day Johanna died.
And we were talking and we were praying and we had a sense in
ourselves of needing to say to God, Your will be done. Praying
that, a sense of handing over - absolutely agonising - and going
back to the hospital, and the professor of intensive care saying to
us, 'She suddenly seems to be going.'

Welby adds:

The presence of Jesus in that room was simply overwhelming.
And there was a sense of handing her over. And that was prayer,
at its most profound and getting exactly the answer we didn't want.

In searching for a metaphor to describe his experience of the Presence of Jesus,
the Archbishop says:

You know the experience on a really windy day, standing on
the top of a high cliff? The wind howls around you to the
degree where it's almost difficult to balance. You feel almost
dazed by it, yet with that there was this extraordinary presence
of God and the power of God touching us very, very deeply,
and love.

Is there a better example of what happened in the room with the first disciples,
who were utterly broken by the brutal death of someone they knew and loved,
than the experience of the Welbys? Like the Welbys, the disciples felt the

overwhelming Presence of Jesus. With the eyes of faith, they *saw* Him and felt deeply, deeply touched by Him.

In prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture, in stillness, we can enter that room, stand with the disciples, and *see* Jesus for ourselves. So often when Jesus appeared people did not recognise Him. These stories are not about physical Resurrection, physical appearances; the Gospel writers want us to go deeper. Seeing with the physical eyes is not enough. Thomas wants a deeper encounter. Thomas touched the wounds of Christ and by His wounds was healed, was made whole. Encounter with the Risen Christ, with Jesus, is real; it is there waiting for us in the pages of Scripture. Amen.

Note from Session Clerk

I know that, for a host of reasons, you will be missing your Church. Life is just not the same when you are unable to attend Sunday services and Church related events. None of us knows for how long this period of lockdown will last. For those of you concerned about the position of our employees I am pleased to tell you that none of them will lose their jobs or lose out financially as a result of the lockdown.

For those of you who may be concerned that you are not able to fund the Church's ongoing financial commitments by reason of the fact that you are unable to come to Church, some options that you might want to consider have been detailed in a separate item on the website in the Current Information

section under the heading 'Options for Offerings'. I suspect that many of you will be putting money aside so that when we do eventually get back to a degree of normality you will be able to make good that which you would have paid in normal circumstances.

Please do not be concerned about the financial wellbeing of the Church during this difficult period in all of our lives. It is there for you now and it will be there for you in better times.

Bob Bartholomew