

Sermon Easter 2, Sunday 11 April 2021

John 20: v 19-31

We all know moments of disappointment and sorrow. I remember John F Kennedy and the brilliance of his presidency. He had a lovely wife, he was rich and came from a truly gifted and powerful family. You would have thought all possible blessings would have flowed from that.

The beginning of his political work was exceptional. I want to mention a moment which is the point of the story. I was at university at the time in a hall of residence. I can remember the exact room I was in when someone rushed in and said that Kennedy had been shot. We turned the TV on and saw the truth. The amazing thing was that everyone who was around at the time, could remember exactly what they were doing and where they were when Kennedy died. He had such an impact on the world that all certainties seemed to disappear and everyone held their breath at this change of world view.

On Easter evening something like that major cathartic disappointment had happened and changed the world view of the disciples. They were meeting together behind locked doors fearful of what would happen next. What would the Jews do now the Passover was over? They could not run away from the fact that they had been bound up with Jesus and they knew the venom and bitterness of the Jews who had arranged his death. So they met in fear and trembling, their hopes utterly destroyed, their hero dead, listening to every step on the stair and for every knock on the door.

Into this total disenchantment and terror came a great reversal. Jesus came into the middle of this fearful group without the door being opened or a knock being heard. He came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you". And when he had spoken he showed them his hands and his side. His hands with the wound prints and his side with the spear wound visible. They were absolutely shattered and overwhelmed.

Before they could recover another thing happened. He gave them a commission, something they had not expected and which involved them up to their necks. He made it quite plain that their mission in the world was needed. Their mission was now to be his and his, theirs. "As the Father has sent me even so I send you."

The group, withdrawn and paralysed with fear, were turned around. From now on Jesus expected them to witness to an amazing reversal. From now on they, in response, were to risk their lives proclaiming that Jesus had entered a new and glorious existence. So they were given his peace, the peace of reconciliation to God.

So in the forty days immediately following Easter Jesus presents himself in physical form again. He walks among his disciples and friends and reconnects with the people he has loved. He meets with Mary Magdalene at the tomb early on Easter Sunday. Then, as we heard in the Gospel, later that same day in Jerusalem, he calms the disciples while they huddle in their upper room hideaway. Then he reveals himself to Thomas in a graphic and powerful way.

When we look at the resurrection appearances we see at once there is something a bit strange about them. Jesus is back, definitely back and indisputably in the flesh, but not exactly the same flesh in which he left the world. We sense from the start that he is here only temporarily and these appearances are fleeting and ephemeral, straining towards a higher purpose that has to be accomplished in a short amount of time.

Certainly his physical body is completely real and three-dimensional as his encounter with Thomas demonstrates in a dramatic way. When the honest Thomas insists "Unless I see the mark of his nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of his nails in his hands and my hand in his side I will not believe." But the evidence of sight alone is, for Thomas, overwhelming and more than sufficient. He responds with a cry as far removed from scepticism as anything in Scripture - "My Lord and my God".

Jesus is no ghost that's for sure. He has a physical body certainly, but of a much more subtle density. He apparently walks through walls. His is a body that's appropriate to a different realm of being, a different mansion in the Father's house. There have been several times when I have heard Christians saying that they have never had an experience of God. They continue on with that gap without being touched by God in a clear way, no moment of warmth or vision or glimpse of glory.

And this story is especially relevant to all who were not present to see the Lord that Easter evening. For the first disciples the time would come when the evidence of sight or touch would not be possible because Jesus completed his return to the Father, beyond the realm of physical senses. But here Jesus speaks a word to all those who cannot see first hand, to those who doubt, to those who have not had a convincing experience.

So it is with reference to all of us who have become believers since, that Jesus utters this special benediction, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed". "This last and greatest of the Beatitudes" wrote Westcott, "is the persistent treasure of the later church". The stories of the Resurrection are the expression of a new reality. The one who has been crucified as they could see from his hands and his side does not remain among the dead.

The living Jesus reveals himself as Lord over the world and its future. He is experienced in the community and at the breaking of bread. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me even so I send you". This is the task that follows the resurrection. This is our redemption and it is a corporate enterprise with many participants. At the centre is the one who originates and makes the radical transformation which sets the process in train. We are invited to come to that radical belief which makes us free for faith and gives us confidence to work with God for God's future.

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