

# Second Sunday of Easter – 7 April 2024

## Message – Spiritual Growth and Transformation

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Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the Light of the World, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

Today's readings all related to spiritual growth and transformation. They are not the last word on the topic but rather among the first.

Our gospel reading is set in the Easter Week, moving from Easter day to today. The disciples see and believe and received Christ's spirit. The word used for breathed on them (ἐμφυσάω/*emphusaō*) occurs only here in the New Testament but is found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

In the Septuagint, it is both the breath of life God gave to the man created in the second creation narrative of Genesis (Genesis 2:7) and the breath of life God gave to the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision (37:1-14). We are to hear that Christ is giving the breath of a new life, in Christ, to the disciples. The disciples are to follow Christ's path and proclaimed God's forgiveness and judgement.

Today, we cannot 'see and believe', as the disciples did, at least not physically. But we can see with our hearts and minds and still come to believe. We can see the love of God in other people, in lives that are transformed, we can capture the vision of Christ's message today, just as did those who heard the disciples and believed them.

Loyal-sceptic Thomas may be slower than the other to come to believe but he is also the most wholehearted when he does make that step. 'My Lord and my God' echoes the Septuagint's translation of *Yahweh Elohim*, the name for God. The tradition that Thomas took the gospel to Parthia, Persia, and India, speaks of a faith that once found was completely transformative.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, is a description of the early church. It describes the attitude of the heart that was instilled in those who heard and believed the testimony of the disciples. There is some debate about the unity of this passage but the perceived disunity may reflect an incorrect reading of the passage.

The early church in Jerusalem showed the unity that Christ said would show that they were follows of the way. They showed love for one another, in both unity and action. Holding all things in common is not to say that they ceased to own anything, you cannot sell what you do not own and follow the practice of the second part of the passage.

Yet, we can recognise that all we have is a gift from God and so we do not own anything; we are just custodians. We can recognise that all that we have been given is given for the benefit of others as much as for ourselves.

Now, I don't know about you but I get a little anxious sharing the things that I have with others. Sometimes, I manage it. It is easy with those you know share your values and will care for those things. It is much harder when you suspect a thing is unlikely to be cared for. For many of us here, books may be a case in point!

Yet, if we recognise that all we have is a gift from God, we should be at ease sharing things with other. And, if we benefit from another's generosity, we should respect that generosity as, equally, that generosity is a gift from God. If we see it in that light, care and respect will be automatic.

Yes, sometimes accidents happen. My experience is that when people are genuinely sorry for any damage, it diffuses my peevedness. I am quite accident prone enough myself to know that accidents do happen; it is in fact much easier to forgive someone else who is sorry that to forgive myself!

What would it be like if we were to see one another's needs and respond with the things we possess? There are many things we own but rarely use. Viewing the world collectively rather than individually, we can help one another both with the things we own but also with the skills we have developed in using the things we own. In doing this we can build community. If we can learn to share our gifts and talents, *'great grace [will be] upon [us] all.'*

Beyond this we can help the wider community; we can show care for our neighbours, for all whose lives we touch. Sharing extends to things we no longer need. Can we pass things on to those who will make better use of them. When we replace an item, do we hold onto the old, just in case, when in fact it could be passed on and continue to be used.

We don't always recognise the link between such things and our spiritual journey. Yet, our spiritual journey is about our relationship with God and with God's creation. It is about what we explicitly or implicitly we place at the centre of our lives. Our path is to find ways of expressing love for God

and for those around us. If our lives are taken up by possessions, what room is there left for love of others or even for genuine love, care and compassion for ourselves.

Our epistle reading was, we assume written to the community of churches from which the Gospel of St John emerged. Many of the themes of the letter are found in the Johannine account of Christ's final discourse to the disciples. The epistle is thought to have been written a decade later.

The issues which we think the gospel was trying to address appear to be unresolved. The tensions may even have widened. We do know what proportion of the Johannine community the letter was addressing but there are two groups that are moving away from the gospel message.

At one extreme, we have Jewish Christians who are struggling with the idea that Jesus is God and who believe that the Levitical laws must still be obeyed. For them God has not washed us clean of our sins and there is no grace.

At the other extreme, we have Gnostics who see Jesus as God but not human and who believe that salvation is entirely spiritual and what we do in this life doesn't matter. For them, how we live in this life doesn't matter at all.

Contrasting these views, it is hard to imagine how the Johannine church didn't instantly implode. In reality, it seems likely there were a range of views. These two caricatures show how particular beliefs can lead to living a life that is not consistent with the life of Christ.

The writer of the first epistle of John draws on Johannine themes to show the fallacy of both of these positions: in

Christ humanity and divinity are brought together, necessarily and inseparably, to set us free from the law to live with the love that Christ has shown for us.

The letter draws on the familiar theme of light: *God is light and in [God] there is no darkness at all.* We cannot claim to be walking with God if we are not walking in the light. And, it is only if we walk in the light that we can have the unity with one another that Christ said would be the sign that we are indeed the followers of the way of Christ.

Our material life cannot be untouched if we truly believe in Christ. Yet, no matter how hard we try, there will be parts of our lives in which there is darkness, we will fall short of the love that is in Christ but Christ's love for us will never fail and God will forgive us if we confess our sins. Christ has made us and all creation one with God.

While choosing to live in the light, may, as it did for Thomas, happen in an instant, learning to live in the light is a life-times work, in which, little by little we reveal more of our lives to the light. This process has to be intentional. We must commit ourselves to the slow process of transformation. It happens through prayer, through being fully present in our worship, through listening to God's word, in creation, in the scriptures, and in one another. It is different for each one of us. We all face our own challenges and pitfalls. If we can find the love and compassion of Christ, we will find that unity and love seen in the early church and then we will once again grow and know fullness of life.

May God give us the courage to walk in the light and so to reveal the light of Christ to others. Amen. Amen.