

## Second Sunday of Easter – YrA – 16 April 2023

### *Message – Faith*

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Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, deepen our faith in your power to give fulness of life. **Amen.**

If our readings a fortnight ago were primarily about hope, today's are about faith. We heard them in the probable chronological order of the underlying developing theology.

Our reading from Acts sets out the grounds for faith in Christ for the early Jewish audience who were not already followers of Christ. Though the words are unlikely to be exactly the words Peter used in his first proclamations of the gospel to his Jewish brothers and sisters, there is good reason to think that the themes within them reflect the early understanding of the significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene.

For the Jews, a new age dawned through "*the deeds of power, wonders and signs*" that God did through Jesus. Peter demonstrates this from the scriptures. Though, as we have found, on more than a few occasions, we are venturing into what may seem to us quite strained interpretations of some of the texts. Yet, if the gospels are true to Christ's own words, Christ himself used our second quote in the acts passage, which was from Psalm one-hundred and ten, as a messianic quote. In Hebraistic thought of the time, the shared use of "*at my right hand*" links the two quotes in their interpretation. So, having heard Christ use that passage, the passage from today's psalm becomes equally relevant.

Though the scriptural support might be a stretch, there is an obvious justice in the one who is without sin being free from Hades and the experience of corruption, or “the power of death” and “the Abyss” as our own version of Psalm sixteen have them. Though sounding quite different to us, Peter’s audience would have understood these terms as equivalent. Ahh, the joys of translation. Peter is quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which we have then translated into English, where our version of the Hebrew Scriptures is directly from the Hebrew to the English.

The exhortation from Peter’s first letter reiterates some of the core themes from the early teaching: The centrality of faith in Christ and the hope brought to us through Christ’s resurrection are both present. There is also an additional theme, the expectation of suffering as a test of the genuineness of faith.

The change of audience is also reflected in the move from focusing on repentance, which we would have heard had we got to the end of Peter’s message in Acts, to a focus on our love for God. Peter is now talking to those who believe in Christ. Our first step of faith is repentance and baptism seen in Acts. Our ongoing journey of faith is a growing love of God incarnate, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

The most developed of the three readings is our reading from the Gospel according to Saint John. Though the language used within the Gospel is the simplest of the Gospels it is the most developed theologically and perhaps as literature.

We should not single Thomas out for his doubt but rather see John as creating an illustration. Within the other gospels Matthew suggests that many doubted, Mark suggests that all of the eleven doubted, and Luke gives four references to people doubting the resurrection.

Remembering that John is writing for a later audience, perhaps around sixty years after Christ's death, we see the encouragement being offered to the church in the words "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Seeing is not a route that is open to any of us two thousand years later. Other means must bring us to faith.

For some they will not remember a time when they did not believe. Others will be able to name a particular moment when they said, yes, I believe in Christ and Christ's message of love for all of the world. For most, there will be a journey with many steps along the way and the faith we have now is not the faith we had when we first believed.

Many of us may find it hard to believe in the resurrection. It defies our life's experience. Yet, we must also look at the birth of the church and wonder at what could have happened to cause this explosion of a new age and a new set of beliefs. When looked at in that light, it is hard to ignore the Christ event, whatever that event was.

The scepticism of our age questions every part of the story, as perhaps did Thomas's own scepticism, but when we face up to what we do know, we have to take the message of Christ seriously. All that I am describing here has roots in my own journey of faith, your journey may be quite different.

The more I journey, the more certain I am that it is our actions that matter far more than specific beliefs. I have faith in the God of Love and Justice and Mercy. I long to see that Love and Justice and Mercy expressed in the church but I am also sure that it is not limited to the church.

We have an inclusive God. Jesus was shockingly inclusive and we often fail to see this. The church has largely failed to live up to such inclusivity. Yet there are glimmers of hope, extraordinary acts and lives which we can all recognise as God at work in particular saints and particular situations.

But, do we have the humility to recognise that same Love and Justice and Mercy in some of those who do not share our beliefs and who do not proclaim Christ, "*My Lord and My God*" in their words, beliefs and faith but do in their actions.

It is hard to discern to what extent the early church was unified. All of our records might be said to have been written from the perspective of the victor. But it does seem that there was something powerful and convincing in the life of the early church; there was something that made them stand out as different and authentic. It would be wonderful if the same could be said of the church today and that has to be our goal, our intention, our purpose, to reveal the Love and Justice and Mercy of God in all things and all places.

Time and again as I return to the story of Thomas, recognising that he is being given as an example of the diversity of perspectives in the early church and that he was certainly not alone among the apostles and wider group of disciple in having doubts, time and again, I am struck by the fact that

Thomas in his doubting still remained a part of the group. This shows great grace on his part and on their part.

The bonds that had grown between the followers of Christ as they spent time together with Jesus went beyond the need to be in complete agreement. Had Thomas left the group his story and ours might be quite different. With all his doubts, Thomas does not cease to be a follower of Christ. Indeed, he is perhaps the most perceptive follower of Christ.

The construction of "*My Lord and my God*", has some ambiguity to it. It may be a cry to God acknowledging belief or it may be the first proclamation of Christ as God. The ambiguity is presumably intentional. It was a part of the journey of faith of the early church. The doctrine of the Trinity is not developed within the scriptures. It is a later understanding seen as the only way to hold together our beliefs. Our Anglican statement of "*only by scripture*" may perhaps run into a few problems here.

If we have the humility to recognise the possibility that we might be incorrect in some of our beliefs, should we not also have the grace to recognise that others may have perceived the truth in ways that have, through time, escaped the church. We may have neighbours with very different beliefs to our own who far more authentically express the Love and Justice and Mercy of God than we do.

In our faith may we all be filled with humility and grace, that in all we do we may encourage the Love and Justice and Mercy of God wherever it is found.

Truly, Truly, Truly. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Qoheleth, the teacher of Ecclesiastes says:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; ... They all have the same breath... All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21)