

Sunday Sermon

Rev'd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 19th April 2020

Acts 2.14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1.3-9; John 20.19-end

When things change dramatically, there is often doubt in the air. Our government may have doubted the seriousness of the Coronavirus pandemic before the beginning of March. Many people still doubt the importance of doing something urgently about global climate change. In constantly changing technological world, many people today doubt any need for faith in God. Reasonable doubt is normal and healthy, but not when it becomes a kind of denial.

When Jesus rose from the dead, many of his disciples seriously doubted it until they met their risen Lord. And one of the best pieces of evidence for the Resurrection is the transformation of the disciples of Jesus, from being confused, frightened and despairing, to being people with such hope and vision that they were ready to die for their faith in Jesus, and who went on to change the world.

Our readings today, from the Book of Acts and the First letter of Peter, date of course from when the early Church was confidently filled with that faith, hope and vision. Whereas the Gospel reading is from the days very soon after the resurrection of Jesus, when of course there was doubt, and so Jesus came to meet them. It is only the presence of Jesus, which can dispel our doubts about faith. This is still the same today, and the key thing is learning to recognise his presence.

In the Gospel of John, everything has significance, and it is highly relevant that the disciples were meeting together weekly. They were certainly meeting for prayer and fellowship. They may have been meeting to remember Jesus in bread and wine, as he had commanded them at the Last Supper. The account is probably also an allegory for the presence of Jesus at Holy Communion. The point is that Jesus came to be with them and to dispel their doubts.

Prayer is the same today. When we pray, we open space for God to come and find us. We ourselves may indeed be seeking God, but when we give proper time to prayer, which must include the time to be aware and to reflect, then what actually happens is that Jesus comes to meet us, to dispel our doubts: about whether he cares about us and our struggles; about whether he cares for his Church and the mission of God in the world, and about whether he cares for those we love.

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ST MARY-LE-TOWER CHURCH IPSWICH

In the New Testament, there is a liminal time between Easter Day and the Day of Pentecost. It's a period of fifty days with its roots in the Jewish calendar. A liminal time is a time of transition, of being on the verge of something new and transforming. It is not a time of feeling settled; indeed it can feel quite uncomfortable. There has been quite a lot of discussion generally in the Church for some time, that we are perhaps in a liminal time for the Church.

In the New Testament, that liminal time was a time for prayer rather than action, with the action then bursting out from the Day of Pentecost. It feels that this time now, during the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are necessarily exiled from our parish church, is indeed very much a liminal time for the Church. And if that is the case, we should be embracing it, rather than chaffing against the restraints and the disappointments, and feeling forgotten. For God has not forgotten us. He continues to seek us out to come to meet us and dispel our doubts. All we need to do is make the time and space to pray.

We have just had the strangest Easter celebrations probably any of us can remember, and many of us are feeling thoroughly unsettled by it, even if we have been active in making the best of it. But now is a time to renew our life of prayer, like the first disciples in that first period between the first Easter and the Day of Pentecost. Let's take it seriously, this business of prayer, and discover anew the faithfulness of Jesus.

There are already some pointers on our parish website about how you can go about this, and there will shortly be more suggestions and resources of how we might pursue this as a church at this time. Don't think of it as a duty, or an obligation. Rather it can be the start of a new or renewed spiritual discipline that leads to new faith, new hope and new life. Through which Jesus comes to meet us to dispel our doubts and lead us onwards.

CJ. 19.04.20