

The Second Sunday of Easter

3 April

Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

A week, as Harold Wilson once said, is a long time in politics. It was also a long time, a very long time for the disciples of Jesus. Well, at least for one of them. For the rest, it took just a day to find that their world had turned upside down. Here was Jesus, according to St John's Gospel, appearing among them in the upper room, sparking off general rejoicing, and then declaiming something about forgiving and retaining sins. They probably didn't stop to think what that might mean, such was the complete and utter amazement that must have held them by the simple fact of his appearing.

But for that other one, something else was in store. Thomas, doubting Thomas by common consent, was not there on that first evening, and had to wait a whole week for the second appearance. Why doubting? Because he demanded to see the wounds of Jesus to have it verified that it was, in fact, their lord and master who had risen from the dead. This duly happens, and John's Jesus uses Thomas' incredulity, as John's Jesus so very often does, to throw the doubts of those around him, in this case Thomas, in a negative light, to emphasise their shortcomings compared to the confidence espoused by the believers for whom John's Gospel was prime evangelistic material: 'Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe!' The Johannine community hadn't seen Jesus and yet believed, so they were bound to be more faithful than the doubting, disorientated Thomas. (However, we preachers never take into consideration the fact that at his first appearing, when Thomas isn't there, Jesus shows the disciples his wounds as a matter of course, thus providing them with the self-same verification which Thomas himself sought; Thomas, in effect, was only asking for what his companions received for free and without censure.)

There can be a smugness that surrounds our reaction to the Resurrection, a smugness evinced by the way in which certain characters are held up for ridicule and criticism in the Gospel accounts, particularly John's. It is a smugness that is embodied in that very annoying character, the Beloved Disciple, about whom much ink has been spilt. I'll come clean at the outset: I am not a fan. In fact I don't believe he ever existed, but that is very definitely another story. He is held up as a paragon of a proper faithful response, whereas the rest of the crew, from poor old Peter to Thomas, are seen as slow and dim-witted by comparison. Well, give me a stuttering Peter and a doubting Thomas over the self-satisfied BD any day of the week because they actually convey a very natural and human response to what it means to have life in the name of the risen Christ.

How do we react to the fact of Easter? Jesus is risen from the dead, and alleluia is our song. After the bleakness of Good Friday, the fact of the Resurrection is, indeed, the cause of great joy. But what does it actually mean for us? What it meant for the disciples was ambiguous to say the least: after Peter and his irritating companion discover the empty tomb, and the Beloved Disciple understands that Jesus must rise from the dead, they actually return to their homes. There's nothing about the awesome shock of the Resurrection, it seems, that the first century equivalent of a nice cup of tea in the comfort of your own home couldn't put right.

And the Resurrection stories are all about confusion and misunderstandings, with Peter, as usual, at the heart of it all. But isn't that how it is with us? If I asked each and every one of you what the Resurrection actually meant I guess I would get all sorts of answers with all sorts of ifs, buts and maybes thrown in for good measure. I know I couldn't give a clear answer. And if the Risen Jesus came and stood here before us all, we would react, I shouldn't wonder, as the women in St Mark's account of the discovery of the empty tomb reacted: they were 'sore afraid.' Joy would not be unconfined. It would be hedged around with confusion and no small amount of fear.

Why? Because the rules of the game have changed completely. No longer would be following a teacher who challenges us daily with his message, but would be instead contemplating 'life in his name', whatever that might mean. What is this new life? What is this Kingdom all about? We wouldn't be human if we didn't hesitantly and nervously reach out to touch it. We know it will transform us because it is 'new' life. But what does that mean exactly, and, if push comes to shove, do we *want* to be fully transformed? Life can be nicely comfortable where we are, thank you very much. After all, most of us, just like Peter, went back home for a nice cup of tea after the jollifications of last Sunday.

For what is the alternative? A confident and unflinching awareness that we are on the right path, that we *know* who the Risen Lord is and what he expects of us. It's as if we have gained a particular and comprehensive insight into the workings of the Kingdom, and we can smoothly sail on into the sunset, with a guarantee that our discipleship has crossed a particular threshold of doubt and uncertainty. I *know* that I have been saved because, well, I *know* the Lord.

Forgive me, but I can't quite reach those Elysian heights. I am down with the doubters, chief of which is Thomas who, no *doubt*, was embarrassed by the put-down he received from Jesus. But that is where I am, realising that, yes, Jesus is risen, but not having much of a clue as what it all means. And yet, and yet I stick with it, as Thomas, Peter and the rest stuck with it because they knew that, despite their blundering and their doubts, the Risen Jesus was the one to follow, that the new life he promises has to be attempted at the very least because it will make us better people.

Surely that is what faith is all about. You see, faith is not certainty. Certainty is not having to believe, not having to think about other possibilities. Certainty is static; it is the way of the fanatic, the person who pushes God on a pedestal high above human experience and keeps him there, protecting him from all comers and even killing in his name. That is not a God in whom I believe. I believe in a God who dwells among us, amidst our uncertainties and our stumblings, introducing us daily to this strange new life which reveals his nature but which we find difficult to adopt, although are goaded into attempting to live out.

And doubt is an intrinsic part of this faith. We make a common and fatal mistake if we think that the opposite of faith is doubt. It is not. Certainty is the opposite of faith, an attitude of mind that projects God and Jesus in our image, which in turn allows the smugness to proliferate. No, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Rather it *drives* faith because it asks us constantly to question what we are about, not resting content with the limited knowledge we already have, but spurring us on to learn more from each other by recognising that you know something about this Jesus that I don't.

Of course there is a potential spiralling downwards at work here: if I doubt every single thing I will be overcome by a spiritual and prayerful inertia that reduces me to an empty shell. But neither Peter nor Thomas surrendered to the dangers of that inertia. Instead they boldly and bravely gathered up their uncertainties and their doubts and allowed them to galvanise their faithful following of Jesus into new adventures, new possibilities, and that precisely is their legacy bequeathed to us.

So, please, let us not dismiss doubting Thomas as a stooge of the Resurrection stories, but as a figure who properly embodies an honest and truly faithful response to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you get home Google Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, a glorious painting of 1602 in which the astonished saint places his finger into the wounded side of Jesus, and then see yourself in exactly that position, furrowed brow, wide-eyed, hand being guided by Jesus into his gaping side, and then ask yourself, 'where will all this lead me?' I don't think that is such a leap of our imagination.