

## **SERMON FOR EASTER 2 | 19.04.2020**

Acts 2: 14a; 1 Peter 1: 3-9; St John 19-31

***Minister, what is your exit strategy for the current pandemic? Minister, are you recommending that everyone should wear face masks? Minister, why are we not considering easing the lockdown now that Germany is planning to do so in order to protect their economy? Minister...***

**You can hear the insistent voices of Laura Kuenssberg or Robert Peston! In our highly charged media age, we encourage our top journalists to harry our politicians because otherwise, how are we ever going to know what is going on? And for their part, the politicians are trained how to share information – and, crucially, when to withhold it. It is an endless game of chess because none of us likes to be kept in the dark and yet someone, somewhere thinks they know best about how much information is good for us.**

**In today's Gospel Thomas is not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to the Twelve in that locked upper room. There is nothing sinister about this: he just wasn't there. But, as you would expect, as soon as Thomas is reunited with them, they can't wait to tell him what they had seen. In one way or another all of them will have said, *We wish you had been there...***

**But he wasn't – and the story they were telling him was, to be honest, unbelievable! For Thomas, and I think for 95% of us, it was too much to take in. No doubt Thomas would have loved to have trusted what his friends were saying - but wasn't it too good to be true? Were they reliable witnesses? *Unless I see his hands and his side, I will not believe* he ends up saying, as much is sadness as anything else.**

**Because what it going on in Thomas' mind is what we all do when we have a decision to make: we weigh up the facts as best we can – and we work out whether we can trust the person who is talking to us. But life is complicated: often we don't have either of those things in the bag. Facts are slippery and people are prone to ... exaggeration!**

**So we might think that Jesus is a bit harsh on Thomas, a week later, when he tells him how lucky he is to have been able to see his Lord risen from the dead. Actually that is equally true of the other disciples too. They were, as Peter says in our first reading, 'proper witnesses' to what happened: they saw it all, right there, in that upper room, behind closed doors. Lucky them!**

To be fair I'm not sure that Jesus is really picking on Thomas at all; what St John is doing in writing up this story up to seventy fifty years after the event, is to encourage the younger generation - and to big up their commitment and their faith in Christ when they were obviously far too young to have ever had the chance to meet Jesus in the flesh.

So perhaps this is the time for us to think through what is going on in our current situation where 'information sharing' is under so much pressure.

And I want to suggest that Jesus was by no means straightforward in the way that he explained ideas to his disciples in the Gospels! He knew he had next to no time to really explain what his ministry was about – perhaps three years at the very most. Time and time again he says to the Apostles, *I have much more I want to share with you, but I haven't time to do so now... and you aren't really ready yet either.*

All the time he is hinting that the rest of what he wanted to teach them would have to wait until after he had risen and ascended to his Father: then – and only then – would he send the Holy Spirit *who will lead you into all truth.*

Which suggests to me something important about the way that God has been working with not just the disciples but with every generation of believers ever since - including you and me. That is to say that the gift of faith is not some instant gift, where everything will make sense at once and give us a nice rosy glow that will last us a lifetime. Some Christians seem to give the impression that once they have been converted then all doubts and fears can be discounted. *I know that I am saved: what else do I need to worry about?*

In my own experience, I find faith much more 'mercurial' than that. One day we feel we have it, and the next day it is much less obvious. Some days we have a wonderful certainty that God is caring for us; on another he seems light years away. We are working with ideas and doubts - a mix of theories and experiences – and with far fewer facts than we would like. When Jesus blesses those who believe but have not seen him in the flesh, he is telling it like it is: faith can be hard work and we will always need to work at it. That is what St Peter was driving at when he quoted King David's words: *I know that the Lord is always with me, and he will not allow me to be overwhelmed.*

**One of the factors that is emerging from today's lock-down is that we have begun to pay much more attention to how society works. Where we would take access to shops and services, hospitals and entertainment entirely for granted, now we are beginning to ask: who is it who makes it possible for us to enjoy these things? The Thursday night clapping for the NHS is just one example of this new respect for the carers, those on zero hours contracts, those who have multiple jobs – all those who keep the basic wheels of civilisation turning. Quite spontaneously there has been an amazing appreciation and sense of solidarity with support workers right across the board.**

**And we might say: *but why has no one told us about how our society works; why haven't we noticed before now the army of cleaners, rubbish collectors, delivery drivers, postmen, supermarket employees, social workers, teachers, pharmacists, funeral directors and carers in homes for the elderly? And they might well reply, we have been here for years – and we done our best to say how hard it is to pay our rent and to make ends meet. But no one was listening. Now they are suddenly called 'key-workers' and their complaints (not least about the lack of protective clothing and equipment) are finally being heard. And quite right too.***

**Perhaps, like the disciples in Jesus' day, we haven't been ready to take in the situation in all its complexity and it has taken this Covid-19 pandemic before we have been ready to understand what has been going on – and going wrong. Only when faced with this degree of isolation have we begun to re-think the importance of our families and our local communities. Never before have there been so many calls by ordinary citizens for better funding for local government so that local needs can be dealt with by people on the ground.**

**And King David in Kerry's first reading, and the Apostle Thomas in Lucy's second reading? Two points to finish with: King David's lovely prayer is about his realization that God's plans were as likely to be long term as short term; he would never see the fruits of the good he was doing now. And Thomas? Perhaps the story of Thomas shows us that we can't ever know it all. Often God communicates much more effectively through other people and our willingness to trust what they say may be even more useful to us than what we have seen with our own eyes.**

**Believing that God will see us through, can only flourish when we look with his patience and wisdom at what is really happening.**

**And as a final thought, I hope you will find this short reflection on 'Easter' helpful. It was written by Dr Stephen Cherry, Dean of King's College Cambridge, and appears in his book *Barefoot Prayers*, SPCK, 2013.**

**Although I long to understand...  
Although I long to know...  
Although I fancy wisdom...  
Although I crave the light...  
I know how little I know.  
I know how often I am confused,  
confounded,  
muddled.**

**Help me to be clear about this at least:  
that I know little;  
that I miss more than I see;  
that I am surprised more often,  
far more often, than  
I ever admit.**

**I love days of blue skies and clear horizons.  
I love the clear map, the vivid description.  
I love the clear instruction,  
the quick result,  
the method that works, the prediction come true.**

**I love that resonance when a story or a poem  
enfolds with insights already  
familiar. I love the thrill of recognition:  
I know that,  
I know this, I know you,  
I know them.  
I love to know why,  
how,  
where  
and when.**

**Alas, it is so rarely like this,  
'tis *never* thus.**

**The mountain range of knowledge:  
hidden in mist from me.  
I see a foothill, and know that every summit is false.  
I walk over rock, I can't even begin to  
understand its story.  
I see the planets - how many can I name?**

**Can I say how the winds reshape the clouds?**

**The night-time journey.  
I imagine a clear path, an open road,  
floodlights, headlights, clear signs.  
I find myself in a Devon lane:  
high hedges, sharp bends, cloudy sky,  
no moon, no stars.  
The headlights have broken, sidelights  
only glow in the dark.**

**Yet I do see a little.  
But no, not enough.  
Not nearly enough.  
The light: a single, flickering, vulnerable  
flame, the sun diffused through mist, a dim torch  
making its own horizon.**

**I need to see more, know more, understand better.**

**Unless, unless, unless...  
I accept it.  
Accept the truth of my lack of vision,  
my lack of wisdom and understanding, and  
begin to learn to walk, to develop  
the confidence, courage and patience  
simply to put one foot in front of the other.  
And so I pray:  
not for wisdom,  
not to see more,  
not to understand better,  
not to find life predictable,  
not to be the one who knows ...  
but for the grace  
to see enough through my own beclouded eyes,  
to accept the morning mist in my mind,  
and to walk with you  
into the mystery,**