

SERMON FOR EASTER 2 | 16.04.23

Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; I Peter 1: 3-9; St John 20: 19-end

A couple of weeks ago Gordon, the Chair of the Arlington Association, emailed me to ask if he could borrow our garden, He had ordered 1400 items for a mass 'planting' in Arlington Square yesterday (Saturday) in advance of the Coronation weekend in May, but because plant deliveries were only on weekdays he needed somewhere to store them all for a few days.

So when we got back from Yorkshire, there were all those plants, in neat serried ranks, covering probably half of our large back lawn!

But that wasn't the most impressive part of the exercise; early yesterday morning, in very damp conditions, a whole team of people turned up to help him move every one of those 1400 pots – carefully stowed in big blue IKEA bags – over the road to their final destination. And it was all done with such bonhomie and apparent ease. Gordon is a natural leader and he achieved a very big task because of the team that he had assembled around him. As I said, it was very impressive.

I tell that story to make a contrast with that of the Apostle Thomas, the focus of today's Gospel. You remember the opening lines – of how the disciples had been all together and how the Risen Jesus had appeared among them and convinced them that, after all the trauma of Good Friday, that he really was alive.

But Thomas had not been there. And when they, in all their excitement, said that they had seen Jesus, he refuses to believe them. Thomas was not going to take their word for it and so we get that familiar quote: *unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, I will not believe.* Thomas is on his own. In today's terms we would describe Thomas as a bit of a loner.

Happily, everything turns out for the best. The next time Jesus appears to the Apostles, Thomas is there too – and, having seen Jesus for himself, he is quick to acknowledge him as his Lord.

But I want to spend just a bit of time this morning exploring this question: what do we do with those who won't easily go along with the crowd, those who openly and regularly refuse to accept what the majority think, who seem, always, to be 'the odd ones out'.

We are quite used to reading the Book of Acts at this time of the year, in the Easter season especially, and reading how the apostles were ‘one in heart and mind’, breaking bread together and sharing all their possessions - even land and property – for the common good.

But that unity didn’t last very long. You remember the chilling story of how Ananias and his wife Sapphira in chapter 5 of Acts dishonestly withheld some of the money from the sale of their house and both die in consequence. Paul takes Peter to task for the way he, somewhat hypocritically, keeps the Jewish eating rules and later on, when the team are in Antioch (so badly destroyed by the recent earthquake), best friends Paul and Barnabas fall out over the unreliability of Mark so that Barnabas and Mark go off in one direction and Paul, Silas and Timothy in another.

And so the question arises: aren’t disagreements just inevitable? People are different and they have strong views and it won’t always be possible to find a compromise; sometimes we have to accept that, even with the best will in the world, we will hold different opinions on a range of issues? In fact, aren’t matters of faith going to be the ones that are most difficult to resolve?

The way that Gordon operates is hugely appealing. He does his homework; he works out the pros and cons in advance and he is clear about what needs to be done; he is both charming and cheerful – and people trust him to have their best interests at heart. And to be fair, the greening of our local open spaces is something everyone can agree on. But even he has had run-ins with people and they have taken their bats home.

So surely we, the Church, dealing with much trickier issues than how to plant out flowers, ought to have, the highest standards about keeping together and being united?

Which is why non-Catholics are forbidden to receive Holy Communion in Catholic churches. There the line is: if you don’t believe all that the Catholic Church teaches then you cannot be ‘in communion’ with those who do. Receiving Holy Communion is a statement of unity and faith in the leadership of the Pope and all that he holds to be true. It isn’t a pick and mix situation: only those who feel able to accept the whole package (Church organisation, ethics, biblical interpretation and the sacramental life) are allowed to receive communion.

And there is a logic to that discipline even if, to our minds as Anglicans, it is not one that seems to reflect what Jesus seems to be doing in this Gospel story. Thomas has made it all too clear that he has to have the evidence of Jesus' resurrection before he can take a full part with the other disciples. He is out on a limb and of course Jesus is disappointed by that. But Jesus still doesn't exclude Thomas from the team of Apostles; he simply says *well that's a shame; blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believe*. Thomas' refusal doesn't break the relationship. Flawed as he is because of his lack of faith, he still remains one of the family.

In other words, in any group there will be a kind of mixed economy. There will be those who feel able to completely support what is being done, and those who have reservations – whether legitimate or not doesn't matter very much.

But what the Christian experience is about is not to say: believe this or go away, but to say *'these are the ideals we feel we want to subscribe to, and we will do all we can to take everyone on board as far as possibly can'*. And the invitation is to do that without rancour and without making those who feel differently from being treated as second class citizens.

And I say this in advance of next week's AGM when we will use this Collect to guide our thoughts. You have heard it many times before:

Give us, we pray, gentle God, a mind forgetful of past injury, a will to seek the good of others and a heart of love, that we may learn to walk the harder road of sacrifice and peace. Grant this through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

In other words, what we are seeking to do is show the secular world how it is perfectly possible to hold quite different views on the issues of our day, but in such a way as to maintain a unity that is much deeper and more profound than any of the opinions being expressed at any one time. It is the unity of trust, of respect and the striving after the common good.

Thomas was, of course, wrong. That time. He needed a new experience of Jesus and he needed proof. But that didn't make him wrong in every situation. None of us are always right and always wrong. The reason why we pray and the reason why we desperately need the gift of the Holy Spirit, is because we have to live 'provisionally': *this is what I believe now – until such time as I get to know better*.

We cannot call ourselves Christians if we stubbornly refuse to listen to other people's views just because we don't like them or we fell out at some point in the past. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth and no-one has the right to say that *this is the kind of Church we are and if you don't like it – go away* as was said to me when I first arrived at St James' all those years ago.

Jesus' patience with Thomas, with Judas, with Peter and with heaps of people who got it wrong on various occasions has to be the example we turn to especially at this time when change is so very much in the air.

And as we come to the altar to receive communion again today, we are not lining up to pass some test of correctness or orthodoxy in belief – or even of behaviour. We come, as those familiar words of William Barclay remind us, *not because we are strong but because we are weak. We come not because any goodness of our own gives us the right to come, but because we need mercy and help. We come because we love the Lord a little and we want to love him more....*

And the grace we receive at Communion makes us, I hope, even more willing to make room for the loners, the more difficult and the more demanding. We welcome people here, not because we like them but because they are loved by God and are therefore our brothers and sisters. Like Thomas, they may be headstrong and difficult to accommodate but that is our calling: to stay the course until things come right.

For here with Christ the standards are different and we are duty bound to do all that we can to weave everyone into the community of the friends of Jesus. How many times should we start again with people – seven times? No, seventy times seven or as many times as it takes.

That is why St Peter, who so endlessly got it wrong, could say with such confidence in our second reading: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading...*

As St Peter would be the first to say about leaders: there are many more Thomas' around than there are Gordons' !