

Easter 2 2022

The Gospel reading we have just heard is often presented as the story of Thomas. The risen Christ appears to the disciples, Thomas is absent on that occasion and receives the reports of his brethren with a good dose of skepticism, but then he encounters Jesus for himself, sees with his own eyes and believes. It's a great story of human faith; yet there's a lot more going on in this reading that I'd like us to explore together in the next few minutes. So, I'm not going to say any more about Thomas today; but If you'd like to hear me talk about him just google a Youtube video of my speech at the Oxford Union from nearly 10 years ago with the enticing title 'Dr Joanna Collicutt says God DOES exist.'

But back to our reading: Chapter 20 forms the conclusion to John's Gospel. Its gist is very similar to the endings of Matthew and Luke (Mark doesn't include resurrection appearances in his Gospel). In Matthew, Luke, and John women or a woman are entrusted with the message of the resurrection; there's skepticism amongst the other disciples who don't fully accept the women's words until they have seen for themselves; the risen Christ then commissions his disciples to go out into the world in the power of the Spirit to spread the good news of Easter.

Matthew stops at that point; Luke continues into a second volume – the Acts of the Apostles; John has a postscript – the wonderful Chapter 21 which is set for next week. But the original Gospel ended with the words we have just heard:

these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

There's a beautiful symmetry here. Recall the opening of the Gospel:

in him was life, and the life was the light of all people... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

If you were at St Mary's the last time I preached here in January (on the wedding at Cana), you might remember that I talked about the 'L' word in John's Gospel, on how the writer wants us to understand that Jesus came to give us life in all its fullness. And here at the end he hammers his message home 'these are written that you may have life in his name.'

But what kind of life? Certainly, something more than existence; he's talking about a way of being based on a foundation of deep peace, infused with meaning and purpose, and expressed in loving relationships. Jesus has spelt this out in his greeting 'Peace be with you', in his earlier assertion that his Way is the Way of Truth, and in his new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. But now as he breathes his Spirit into his disciples he reveals more. There are two important things to notice here. First, who gets to receive the Spirit and secondly how this is to work out in their lives.

It's clear from John's account that not all of the Twelve were in the house when Jesus entered through the locked doors – Thomas wasn't there for one. It's also clear that several other disciples not from among the Twelve were there, almost certainly including Mary Magdalene, as she had gone to the house to tell them, 'I have seen the Lord.'

This wasn't an elite group. Just as in Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost a mixed group of Jesus' comrades, male and female, leaders and followers, somebodies and nobodies, were all together.

The Spirit is given to the gathered community, not to certain designated individuals. This is reflected in the prayer for candidates that we say immediately following baptism, a baptism we received anew at the beginning of today's service through the sprinkling of baptismal water:

May God, who has received you by baptism into his church, pour upon you the riches of his grace, that within the company of Christ's pilgrim people you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit, and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory.

So, the Spirit is for all baptized Christians in the context of the community of faith in which we find ourselves. And how does this work out in our lives? According to St Paul we get to experience intimacy with God our loving parent whom we are able to call on as our Abba, and we find our lives more prone to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But in our reading Jesus says something else very specific: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' Because the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, his body, the community of Christians baptized in water and the Spirit, also has this authority.

This is a difficult idea and, over the years it's provoked controversy and disagreement. In more Catholic traditions the pronouncement of God's forgiveness is seen as the exclusive role of individuals ordained as presbyters. But the Reformation was a push-back against that; Protestantism points to passages such as those set for our other readings for today – Peter and John's insistence in Acts Chapter 5 that the Holy Spirit is given to all those who obey the teaching of Jesus, and the first chapter of the Book of Revelation that insists that all Christians are priests.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition is perhaps the most instructive because so much of its theological understanding is based on deep prayer in the Spirit. For example, the eleventh century monk Symeon the New

Theologian held that where forgiveness of sins is concerned ordination is not as important as a personal relationship with Jesus. He wrote:

Do not try to be a mediator on behalf of others until you have yourself been filled with the Holy Spirit, until you have come to know and to win the friendship of the King of all with conscious awareness in your soul.

He was happy to put his money where his mouth was by permitting lay monks and nuns to act as spiritual directors and confessors.

As in everything else, we in the Church of England navigate our way through these troubled waters by permitting a range of perspectives, but the emphasis remains strongly on the priesthood of the whole people of God. Listen to the introduction to the service of ordination:

God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God's love and to work for the coming of his kingdom.

To serve this royal priesthood, God has given a variety of ministries.

The service culminates in the ordination of the candidates not to become priests (because we already are), but to the 'office and work of a priest' in a particular community. It's a nice distinction but it's crucial.

This morning I am not celebrating the Eucharist, I am presiding at our celebration of the Eucharist. And this is marked when I say 'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.' which means something like, 'Shall I say grace on behalf of us all?'.

And when you respond 'It is right to give thanks and praise.' you are saying 'OK – go on then.' You give me permission to start the great prayer of thanksgiving. I can't do it without you.

That goes for all aspects of our life together. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet at the last supper. He didn't say, 'The leaders among you must wash the feet of those below you in the pecking order' (though it seems to have developed that way in church tradition). He told the whole group to wash each other's feet – to learn to serve and to receive service - because mutuality makes for solidarity, the building up of the community in love.

It's the same with forgiveness. Only God can forgive sins, but with the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit we are caught up into the economy of divine reconciliation; we are all empowered to rise above the human desire for vengeance and to make the painful and risky move towards seeking and granting forgiveness. This requires discernment, wisdom, and due attention to justice. But where it happens well, we are unburdened and empowered, we grow into our status as children of God, and we shine as a light in the world, for 'To err is human; to forgive, divine.'