

St Botolph's Church Worthing
Second Sunday of Easter 3 April 2016
John 20: 19-31
Father Roger Walker

Last Sunday we were celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day, but our Reading for that day showed the disciples very uncertain about what the empty tomb meant – they seemed to have forgotten Jesus' prophecy that he would be killed and would rise again on the third day. All through that day there must have been a debate going on about what had really happened and could they believe the women's account of what they had seen? Clearly, however, their basic feeling was not celebration – like ours was – but fear. Fear that the Jewish authorities might find them and have them crucified as they had Jesus, hence hiding behind locked doors. But their doubts were soon to be resolved in an amazing way: for suddenly Jesus was standing among them. He had come through the locked door in a way that would not have been possible before the Resurrection, but he behaved in a perfectly normal way. 'Peace be with you' he said: the standard Jewish greeting, 'Shalom', still used today.

Then, to prove to them beyond any doubt who he was, he showed them the wounds where the nails had been driven through his hands and where the spear had pierced his side. Then, at last, celebration rather than fear takes over - 'then were the disciples overjoyed when they saw the Lord' – but, rather than discussing with them what had happened, Jesus did a rather amazing thing. He breathed on them and said 'receive the Holy Spirit'. That does not make a lot of sense in an English translation, but in the Greek in which the Gospels were written, the word *pneuma* means both breath and spirit. The same is true of the Hebrew that Jesus would have spoken where *ruach* means both breath and spirit.

This gift of the Holy Spirit was not as all encompassing as the power of the Holy Spirit that was to be given to them in seven weeks time at Pentecost. We will hear about wind and flame then, rather it was for a specific and - to the Jewish disciples – a very amazing purpose. For Jesus said 'if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven: and if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven'. This was amazing because the Jews believed that God alone could forgive sins.

Remember the accusation of blasphemy against Jesus when he healed the paralysed man lowered through the roof by his friends with the words 'Son, your sins are forgiven'. It was a remarkable power to have given to the apostles and, of course, the Church believes that they were able to pass on their power. So when I was ordained the Bishop laid his hands on my head and said 'Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven: whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained'. This – going back to the power Jesus gave his apostles on the first Easter Day – is why I stand each Sunday to pronounce God's forgiveness of sins. It is why I hear confessions and pronounce absolution.

The acceptance of God's forgiveness is one of the first things we do each Sunday, based on this first appearance of Jesus to his disciples. The second thing we do is to share the Peace: by making this the first word he spoke to the apostles Jesus changed 'peace' from a simple greeting to a significant Christian word. For us it is the sense of unity, love and forgiveness that Jesus wanted his disciples to know among themselves – all disagreements were to be resolved.

But when Thomas came back there was an immediate disagreement. You can imagine all the others, excited by telling him about seeing Jesus, and he thought they had all been hallucinating. 'Unless I have concrete proof, I will not believe' he said.

He had to wait a week for his proof, when Jesus came in the same way – and he knew what Thomas had said he needed as proof. Thomas did not need to touch Jesus' hands or side: he just fell to his knees in worship, 'My Lord and my God', and Jesus – practical man that he was then looks ahead. 'You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed'. That's us – we believe what the Bible tells us about the Resurrection of Jesus. We believe that he was the Son of God and our Saviour, because of all that we read about the things he said and did.

That belief is the most important thing in our lives because, as St John wrote at the end of our reading, 'these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ – the Son of God – and that, by believing, you may have eternal life in his name'.

Our Reading today seems to rush us through a whole week of Jesus' risen life but it does have some very important things to teach us: besides the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead! It teaches us the importance of peace – meaning unity, love and forgiveness – within a Christian community. It teaches us the importance of accepting God's forgiveness, so that sin may not stand between him and us. It also teaches us that our own belief – our Christian faith – is what opens the way to eternal life for us. Peace, forgiveness, belief – may they be part of our lives through this Easter season and beyond.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

3.4.16