

Second Sunday of Easter ('Low Sunday')

John 20:19-end; Acts 5:27-32

Normally, any good story ought to end with a good, solid conclusion. If you're a fan of *Inspector Morse*, for instance, you'll know that each episode normally begins with someone being murdered, and often along the way, someone else gets murdered as well.....Morse and Lewis then carry out their often complex investigations; but after watching a couple of hours of all this going on, we don't expect the whole thing to then be left 'hanging in the air' – by the time we get to the end of the episode, we naturally expect to find out 'who done it'. Yet there are, at the same time, those TV programmes which thrive on leaving things open-ended. Soap operas are obvious examples. You simply don't get a clear conclusion to an episode of *Coronation Street* or *Eastenders*, because the whole idea is to maintain the suspense, so that you'll want to watch the next episode, and the next one, and the next one after that.....It's a story which is constantly 'to be continued'.

And it's a bit like that with Easter. On Easter Sunday we celebrate Christ risen from the dead, we recall the empty tomb, the appearance of the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene and the other women. But what then? We get to this 'Low Sunday' (as it's traditionally called), and it seems like a bit of an anti-climax. And I can imagine the disciples must have felt a bit like that on that first Easter Sunday evening. Yes, there was the empty tomb and the reports from the women that they had seen Jesus alive. But what were they meant to do *now*?

And so we find them gathered together in the house – locked away in fear of the Jews. They were obviously confused and perplexed by all that had happened, but were unsure of their next move. What happens next? And it's into *this* situation that the risen Lord comes among them. Jesus provides them with evidence that he is indeed alive – showing them his hands and his side – that it really is him. It's a reminder, at the same time, that he is the *suffering* Lord - that he had to first endure the cross in order

to gain the victory over death. And by the Lord's greeting, 'Peace be with you / Shalom', he restores the apostles to a renewed relationship with him – he demonstrates that he doesn't hold their previous failures against them – he offers them a new start.

Yet at the same time, Jesus comes *not* just to assure them of his triumph over death – important though this is, of course – but he also instructs and prepares them for the task ahead – for what comes next.

So first and foremost, the Lord commissions and empowers them for mission. And we find revealed here something of the importance as well as the character of that mission. Jesus says to them, "...as the Father has sent *me*, so I send *you*." Mission is at the heart of God – it reaches back into the eternal relationship of the Father who sends, and the Son who is sent. And so the Church is defined by its mission to the world – it's not an optional extra, but rather it's absolutely intrinsic to what we're all about. And notice that the mission in which Christ's followers are called to share is not something new,

but rather it's a continuation of Christ's work during his earthly life. In the original Greek, the phrase, "as the Father has sent me", is expressed in a tense indicating a past action which continues in the present, while the phrase, "I am sending *you*", is in the present tense and indicates a continuous, ongoing action. So there is only *one* single mission – it's about being caught up in the one great movement of God. And we're *all* called to share in this divine mission – to continue Christ's work – and we are sent with the authority of our risen and exalted Lord. And when we proclaim the gospel, the effect of it is that it will lead either to people repenting of their sins (in which case their sins will be forgiven) or they remain unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness (and their sins are retained).

Now the task to which we're called can seem a really daunting one. But remember that Christ makes the resources available for us to be able share in his mission – we're not to go about it in our own strength. So Jesus offers us the gift of the Holy Spirit for the purpose - "...he breathed on them and said to

them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'." Hence we need to be open to receiving God's Spirit. For it's only when we, the people of God – the Church, are filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that we can effectively carry out the task of proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name.

Now within this context of commissioning for mission, with its universal perspective, there's also a very *personal* story of doubt and discovery – the account of Thomas and his struggles to believe that Jesus had risen.

Thomas, of course, tends to get a rather negative press – we tend to naturally refer to him as 'doubting Thomas'. Yet we also know from earlier on in the Gospel that he was devoted to Christ, even being willing at one stage to die with Jesus (11:16). And even *here*, to be fair on him, he wasn't the *only* one who doubted reports that Jesus had risen – the others were certainly rather reluctant in believing the report of the women at first, until they themselves saw him. It's just that Thomas was rather

more open and honest about his struggles with believing it. And he was quite adamant about it – "Unless I see.....*I will not believe*" – the Greek here contains an emphatic double negative.

There is so often that need for certainty before we actually commit ourselves to something. We might have a strong urge to believe, but at the same time, we have that strong desire to see the evidence first, for fear of otherwise becoming disillusioned or disappointed. If we're really honest about it, doubt is probably something which forms part of *all* our lives from time to time, or maybe even more frequently; one could even go as far as to say that it's an inevitable feature of the Christian life. It can so easily lead us to despair. But I would like to suggest that it can actually be turned into something truly positive; because when we ask those questions of faith, it can so often lead to us gaining a deeper understanding of God's truth. Thomas asked the question, and it led him to a truly profound realisation of who Jesus *is* – he declares, "My Lord and my God!" His doubt leads ultimately to the first confession of true Christian

faith. And interestingly, he grasps this truth, not so much intellectually, as devotionally – it comes from the heart.

So, I would urge you not to simply leave your doubts ‘hanging in the air’, as it were, but to do something about it – to investigate further. Doubt is not a sin. The Lord knows all our doubts (as he did Thomas’), but we need to work through our doubts towards a renewed confidence in the Lord. Remember that Thomas might have been a doubter, but he became a firm *believer*.

Now we, of course, are not quite in the same position as Thomas, in the sense that *he* had been granted the privilege of witnessing Jesus in his resurrected body first hand. By contrast, *we* are those who, as the Lord says, have *not* seen, yet have come to believe. So, how can *we* be sure that what we believe is true? Well, it’s because of the reliability of the apostolic witness to Jesus, as recorded in the four Gospels.

Our contemporary society lays a great emphasis upon the need for evidence – it’s perhaps partly a product of our so-called ‘scientific age’. The popular maxim, ‘seeing is believing’ is not far removed from Thomas’ statement, ‘unless I see, I won’t believe’. But the crucial thing about the Christian Faith is that it’s not based on mere speculation, but is grounded in historical reality. In the final couple of verses in the Gospel reading, the author addresses his audience directly and makes it clear that he has recorded all these things in his Gospel so that we may have confidence in our conviction that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. This is eye-witness testimony to Christ’s life, death and resurrection, recorded for us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Truth. So, the evidence *is* there to be investigated - our faith has solid foundations. As the apostle Peter declares in his Second Letter (2 Peter 1:16), “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been *eyewitnesses* of his majesty.”

So, in a sense, the story of Easter is a story which is to be continued in our own lives, as we seek to be faithful witnesses to the risen Lord in our present age. We are called and commissioned by the Lord to share in his mission to the world. Remember the way in which, in our reading from Acts, the apostles felt absolutely compelled to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Even though the religious leaders in Jerusalem tried their uttermost to prevent them from doing so, they simply could not keep quiet about what they bore witness to – that God had raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his right hand on high – and to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. And why such boldness? Well, it’s precisely because they knew that the gospel is of divine origin – they, and we, are under obligation to obey God’s command to proclaim it, beginning here in our own neighbourhood. And we do so, *not* in our own strength, but empowered by the Holy Spirit – the chief witness to the gospel.

So, although we might call today ‘Low Sunday’, we are nonetheless reminded today of our *high* calling. For the command Jesus gave his apostles, he gives to us today – “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.....” Are we ready and willing to obey?

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, risen, ascended and glorified, as you sent out your apostles to proclaim your gospel to the nations, help us to have confidence in your truth and a real desire to make you known in this our generation. For your name’s sake.
Amen.