

## Sermon for All Saints', 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

*Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands.  
Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."*

I often think when hearing our gospel of delightful couple I knew at college who were great believers in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring healing and blessing; they had seen so many miracles, indeed had performed many of them themselves and they were passionate evangelists: proclaiming the Resurrection in their words and actions to the many that they met. In their final year at college their new-born child, aged only a few months, tragically died. Despite the prayers of many and the invocation of the Spirit, none of it had delivered their son from his death. This was, as you might imagine, devastating, and left them very much at sea - not only emotionally (as the death of any child does) but also spiritually; how could the God whom they'd seen heal many not heal their son. How could this all-powerful God, who had triumphantly defeated the powers of Death in the Resurrection, now abandon them? I remember at the time, someone commenting that they 'believed too much': that they had expected God to act in the world in a way that was unrealistic and which was bound, eventually, to disappoint them. I wonder. But on the other hand, there is evidence across the Bible that people have always struggled to understand how a faith that preached the Resurrection married up with a life with its inevitable griefs and pain.

Some people suggest that St John had such people in mind when he was writing his Gospel. It's said that some in his community may have been engaged in a sort of mystical reflection upon the resurrection and ascension of Jesus which prized a hyper-spiritual state. Theirs was a faith that drew its worshippers *out* of the world, which looked askance on the pain of the world, and may have even doubted that Jesus himself had really inhabited human flesh. Rather, as was being claimed by some, he'd only *seemed* to inhabit flesh; if the right spiritual techniques were employed than we too, they claimed, might be taken out of our pain and suffering into this new life.

John, from the beginning of his Gospel (when he tells us in compromising terms that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us) to in his Resurrection accounts, wants to claim quite the opposite. The risen Jesus *does have* a spiritual body - it is incorruptible, it can move between rooms with locked doors and at first sight, across the gospels, he's immediately recognizable. Something has changed. And yet there is continuity. He eats. He breathes on them. And in this extraordinary encounter with doubting Thomas, the Lord invites him to put his hand into his wounds.

The wounds have not been erased, but have been glorified; the resurrection has not erased the crucifixion, but has taken the physical pain, suffering and wounds of the cross into this glorified and risen body.

It might not seem much but to many in the ancient world, which looked rather doubtfully on the value of the physical body, this account of Jesus would have been startling and disturbing. John probably would have gained for more enthusiasm from Greek followers if Jesus had been raised to look like one of the gods in ancient Greek art: radiant in muscular beauty and perfect proportions. Instead we hear of the wounded yet changed body of Jesus inviting Thomas to feel his wounds. His response? 'My Lord and my God' – astonishing words when you think about– he addresses the risen Jesus as God, the wounded Jesus as God God; wounds present, yet mysteriously glorified by the Cross.

*Blessed are those who believe and have not seen,* writes John.

That is, blessed are those who, bearing their own doubts and having been wounded themselves and have wounded others, to proclaim with Thomas: My Lord and my God.

Do I mean by this that we ought to glorify pain? No, Christ does not glorify it but redeems it. For the Christian, to walk the path of the Cross and to proclaim the Easter faith is to hold the two in tension: it is to say, as with Sarah Coakley, that “in Jesus the inescapable and meaningless suffering of my particular life *intersects* with the transcendent power of salvation and is lifted up, ‘handed over’, to be shot through with Christ’s glory. Here, and only here, not in some spurious fantasy land of escape, do I learn the real way of peace and joy. Here and only here, do I walk the way of Jesus, through death to new Life.” (Holy Week addresses at Salisbury, 2016)

Or to put it a bit more simply, to live the Resurrection is not to think that we can escape the pain and suffering, but it is to live in hope: hope that the limitations and pain and wounds of this life can and will be transformed, in this world or the next; can, in fact, become the source of glory, of love, and the very fabric of God’s new creation. Nothing is now out of the orbit of God’s power to heal and to save.

As we come to this table today, let us bring our doubts honestly into his presence and be revived in hope as we feast with our wounded and risen Lord.

