

‘Peace, forgiveness, renewal’ – A homily for the Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4.32-35

John 20.19-end

Fundamental to Carl Jung’s psychoanalytical thought was the idea of archetypes. These are hidden forms given particular expression by individuals and cultures that express unconscious desire and collective thought. Such forms – such as the mother, the fool, the child or the warrior – can be found embedded in a culture’s art, myths, religion and poetry and are discerned in the personality and dynamic behaviours of both individuals and whole cultures. It could be argued that such archetypes, once speaking of stability and structure, history and collective memory, are now beginning to break down along with the institutions that traditionally have embodied or expressed them: two of which are particularly resonant to us today: Monarchy and Religion.

The first time we meet the disciples in today’s Gospel they are hiding behind locked doors, caught between fear and hope. They cannot yet leave the grief of yesterday behind them and they are not yet ready to face the promise of the future. During his lifetime they had gathered around Jesus as a living, breathing archetype. Here was their Messiah, forced to carry the weight of conflicting symbolic meaning and expectation all the way to the cross: a military champion, leading the armies of heaven to vanquish their foes; or perhaps a priestly ruler, ushering in a time of peace and purity; or perhaps a revolutionary Messiah, championing the cause of the poor and toppling those in power? None of this had happened and as the expectations crumbled, so did their ability to cope with life. And so we find them huddling in the darkness: impotent and afraid.

So often we are told that we live in a world in crisis, a world in which trust has given way to suspicion, cynicism, iconoclasm. Hearing and reading the tributes to the Duke of Edinburgh yesterday, much of the focus has been on stability: his constancy to the Queen,

the commitment of his relationship to her and to the nation; his steadfast reliability. This kind of longevity is rarely celebrated today in a culture of the endlessly new, and in many ways it is an important reminder of what really matters in a world that has become dangerously unpredictable in the last year. But what is important for us all to remember is that beneath the archetypes we project all around us are real fleshy people, frail people, people who live and grieve. We can throw all of our judgements, expectations, frustrations and fears on an archetype, but we must beware of the damage our collective desires can have on real people whether they be royal or not.

What is extraordinary in the Risen Jesus' encounters with his disciples is that they show his utter disarming of their projections and fears, his constant refusal to be their talisman or totem. He comes to them only as their friend. And what does he do to defuse their anxious projections? He speaks peace, he empowers them to forgive, and he rebuilds their failed relationships.

Jesus' word of peace to his disciples reminds us that when we encounter the other person we are full of projections, fears, suspicions, antagonisms. We are primarily afraid that to allow the other person to be who they actually are might in some way hurt or harm us, that we need to defend ourselves from them. This is to place hostility at the heart of our relationships, at the heart of our communities, at the heart of our world. But as Timothy Radcliffe reminds us, 'On Easter Sunday [Jesus] overcame all the absences – the distances, silences, misunderstandings, disloyalties – by which we are separate from one another and from God... For him to be risen is, then, not just to be alive once more: it is to be the place of peace in which we meet.'

The second thing Jesus does is to breath on his disciples and say, 'receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.' In this liturgical act Jesus recreates humanity itself. Just as God creates the first human being by 'breathing into his nostrils the breath of life,' so now Jesus does the same to his disciples on the other side of death and grief. But even if for those first human communities ever spiralling forms of

retribution and violence set the tone for how each member was to be treated, 'an eye for an eye and soon the whole world is blind,' Jesus instead breathes forgiveness into the lungs of his disciples. For the new community of the Church only forgiveness will bring life and breath, growth and peace. This is why the word of forgiveness is given at the start of every Eucharist, not to remind us how sinful and rubbish we are, but rather to show us how life-giving and dynamic real forgiveness can be.

And finally, Jesus rebuilds failed relationships. Thomas' questions and his refusal to believe is not met with harsh judgement, exclusion, rebuke or wrath, but instead Jesus asks him gently to feel his wounds, to reach out, to touch him and to hold him. He allows Thomas, distanced and grieving, to reconnect, to feel and to heal. His words, 'do not doubt but believe,' are the warm words of encouragement from a friend, and it is this renewal of relationship that breaks Thomas out of his grief and despair and enables him to live again, to believe again, to see again.

Perhaps like those first disciples we are caught up in anxious projections of half articulated fears, hopes and insecurities. Perhaps we too feel locked up in a world that makes little sense to us anymore, or else we feel adrift in a world that has lost its stability and security. Wherever we find ourselves, the Risen Jesus meets us there, speaking peace, enacting forgiveness, renewing loss. Reach out, touch his wounds and be made whole.