



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 7.55-end](#) , [1 Peter 2.2-10](#) , [John 14.1-14](#)

7 May 2023

Happy Easter! We continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus during this Easter season.

On the first Easter Sunday something fundamentally changed. From that moment death no longer had the last word. Evil no longer determined the future of humanity. The past no longer held us captive. A new force for good called forgiveness was empowered to change our lives. The human heart no longer was determined by selfishness and greed. Such was, such is, the power of resurrection, released in the raising of Jesus from the dead.

The resurrection was an event that took place in public. The evidence of the empty tomb was there for all to see. The resurrection of Jesus has relevance and meaning for all peoples. It was God's decisive intervention in the life of creation.

During these Sundays of the Easter Season we have been reading the story of the early church. Last week we were presented with what would appear to be the ideal community: a community devoted to a common life, breaking bread together, praying, selling possessions to lift up the poor and to feed the hungry, living in peace and harmony.

Today we are stopped in our tracks. The ideal has been lost: it's turned into persecution. We begin to see emerging the pattern, shape and reality of the community we now call the church.

In the Acts of the Apostles Stephen, one of seven deacons set aside by the community to serve its widows, becomes the infant church's first martyr. Stephen pushes the boundaries of emerging Christian thinking: he criticises the Temple and how it worked; he asserts that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. His vision of the risen and ascended Jesus in heaven as the Son of Man, standing at that special place, the right hand of God, was blasphemy to the religious authorities.

And it's all a step too far, and the first wave of persecution was unleashed: as a result, new believers are dispersed throughout the ancient world; beyond Judea, and neighbouring Samaria, westwards across the Mediterranean, and eastwards past Syria. Saul – soon to be the apostle Paul – makes his first appearance as Christianity begins its journey out of the Holy Land into Gentile nations: he's holding the coats of those who kill Stephen with relish, and we're told he approves! Beyond this point, things would never be the same. In the mystery of God, it's through suffering, through sharing in the wounds of the crucified Jesus that Christianity spreads beyond its comfort zone and becomes missionary.

And it's the same for the community to which the Apostle Peter was writing: those like newly-born infants, gathered around the belief that Jesus is the Messiah, a diverse group from different races, backgrounds and faiths. The movement that proclaimed the risen Jesus as Lord had a turbulent start, and accelerated by Stephen's killing, was now spreading rapidly. We're thirty years later in the story. Times were hard. Groups of Christians were regularly the recipients of organised violence. What is more the early Christians were beginning to realise that their expectation that the risen Jesus would return shortly was wrong. They needed to settle down for the long haul and engage with the world.

Whereas Stephen set out a vision of who Jesus was – risen, ascended, in glory at the right hand of God the Father, our humanity in Jesus now part of the Godhead - Peter sets out a vision for the church – a new family; a community which has received God's mercy; a group to tell the world the good news of the stone that the builders rejected; a new people gathered around the life of the risen Lord.

But it's Thomas, the disciple who draws it all together. As a natural sceptic, I am fond of Thomas: in the way that St John's Gospel tells the story he is my favourite disciple. Not least because it's on his lips, that the high point, the conclusion of the Gospel is found: 'My Lord and my God', he says, after having questioned Jesus' resurrection. At that moment, and this morning, by his questioning of Jesus, the example of Thomas invites us forward in the journey of faith.

'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' What his question boils down to is this: 'who is God, what is God like and how do we reach him? Good straight questions. They have occupied Christian theologians for centuries. Yet the answer is found on the lips of Jesus; look at me, believe in me, because I am what God is like. You get to God by following me, by shaping your life by my life. To look at the risen Jesus is to see God and to grasp what God is like. Michael Ramsey, archbishop of Canterbury in the 1960s used to say: 'God is Christlike, and in him there is no unchristlikeness at all'.

'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Thomas' stubborn questioning yields some of the best known words in the scriptures: to find God we follow Jesus. Like the first martyr Stephen in the self-giving of his life, we imitate Jesus. This takes us to God. Jesus is on the way with us. The way of Jesus involves suffering but it is the suffering that is born out of love for God and God's world. Its suffering that does not distance us from the realities of this world but deepens our engagement with it.

One of my favourite poets is the Anglican priest Malcolm Guite, and he wrote a poem about St Thomas which goes to the heart of what we are trying to grasp. He writes:

We do not know... how can we know the way?"

Courageous master of the awkward question,

You spoke the words the others dared not say

And cut through their evasion and abstraction.

Oh doubting Thomas, father of my faith,

You put your finger on the nub of things:

We cannot love some disembodied wraith,

But flesh and blood must be our king of kings.

Your teaching is to touch, embrace, anoint,

Feel after Him and find Him in the flesh.

Because He loved your awkward counter-point

The Word has heard and granted you your wish.

Oh place my hands with yours, help me divine

The wounded God whose wounds are healing mine.

The way of Jesus is drawn out by the courage of Thomas in asking the hard question. The way of Jesus is healing through suffering. The wounds of the risen Christ, the struggles of Jesus' own persecution and death are marked permanently in Jesus' risen body now in the presence of God. As symbols Jesus' wounds speak of the offer of healing through death and resurrection. They are symbols that hold the promise that the struggles of the past do not determine the future, but as raw wounds transformed they contain within them new possibilities - unimagined happenings, fresh starts, new beginnings.

Through death and resurrection, through the wounds of our Lord there is healing at every level of our being. This is the healing that brought Thomas to faith. It's the journey that the early Christians were on in their suffering through persecution. It's the healing that helps us find out who God is. It's our journey to

death and into the life of the resurrection – both in our daily lives as we live out our baptism but also in that profound sense that in death we travel on the journey with Jesus so that we might rise with him to new life, to discover God’s truth in all its fulness.

On this coronation weekend we are given a vision of Jesus and a vision for the church. We are drawn by the vision of Jesus and the healing that he offers into the vision of the community of God’s people.

And yesterday, we were given a King and a Queen. The symbolism was profound, and for me it was the anointing that took place privately behind screens that was the most moving part. The words heard only sotto voce, but an intimate moment, as the king was gifted the symbolism of oil – on his head, on his hands and on his breast. A rich, overflowing, lavish gesture of God’s love that speaks of task and mission and purpose, echoing the tradition of the anointing of kings in many cultures over the centuries, recognising the needful gift of the Spirit of wisdom in service of all.

But if there was a significant shift in meaning from previous coronations it was towards a greater understanding of community. We saw it in the invitation list and the many attending who work as volunteers and enablers in civil society, recognising our king’s innovations and support of the charitable sector over many decades. We see it in the events of this weekend – the Big Screen yesterday, the Big Lunch after this service, the Big Help Out tomorrow, and not least of all in our service of commemoration this evening when we shall celebrate the role of the voluntary and community sector in civil society and dedicate ourselves to service in the future. The importance of volunteering in creating a good civil society is one of the great contributions to public life King Charles brings with him to the throne.

Being in community is foundational to our humanity. We discover community in our families, in our close friendships, in our workplace colleagues, in spaces where we volunteer, in our schools and in our faith communities. We are shaped by the communities in which we live and work. How we behave and even who we are at the deepest levels of our identity, is shaped by the communities we inhabit. It is not only the community of the church that it shaped by the identity of the risen Christ but it’s a message for the whole of society, in all our diversity and variety.

It’s the power of the resurrection that opens up the possibility of transformation for good in public life. The more deeply we grasp the vision of Jesus, the more deeply we will grasp God’s vision of community. The more deeply we accept the truth of the resurrection – that the goodness of God triumphs over human self-centredness - the deeper will be our change of attitude towards God and towards others. As this happens, we become ever more in touch with the work of God throughout God’s creation and the flourishing that God desires for us all.

To go back to the poem, may we together with our wounds reach out to the wounds of Christ who is king of kings and share in the transforming healing of God. Amen.

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