

3rd April: Second Sunday of Easter

An In-Between Time

Acts 5.27-32; Psalm 118:14-29 or 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20.19-31

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Last Sunday was, as we know, Easter Day. Our church was full of people celebrating the day that the Lord has made (Ps. 118.24) by rising gloriously from the dead. But our celebration isn't now over. The season of Easter continues for forty days as a time of festal procession and music, with God praised in heaven as on earth for his mighty deeds (Ps. 118.27, 150).

It would be easy to think that the story of how Christ saved the world from sin and death has, like our Easter celebration, now reached its ending. On the Sunday after Easter, we might think, we can comfortably sit back and reflect on Christ's work as finished, because his passion and death are over and his resurrection has been accomplished. Along the way there were times of great confusion and doubt about whether Jesus was who he claimed to be. He entered into Jerusalem, with the crowds lining the streets shouting 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' (Ps. 118.26) as he rode by. Yet five days later he'd been betrayed, arrested, imprisoned, assaulted, condemned, and crucified, finally being gazed upon with pierced side on the cross (Acts 5.30, Rev. 1.7). Following so closely his triumphant reception, these events were shockingly unexpected, but the story we might now see as happily resolved.

In fact, I want to suggest today that, a week into Eastertide, very little is resolved. Our readings show that, in this season, we are inhabiting in-between times. As the Lord announces in Revelation (1.7-8), he is Alpha and Omega, both the beginning and the end. If this is true, then it's unlikely that we actually know the ending of the story of his saving deeds. If we did, this conclusion would be ours and not his.

In the reading from Acts, Peter is typically enthusiastic before the Council, merging three different moments of Christ's saving work: the Crucifixion, the Ascension and Pentecost (5.30-2). But today we do well to remember the time when the disciples were still waiting for Christ's Ascension into heaven and the sending of the Spirit ten days later.

We learn a lot about this from our gospel reading, which tells us much about the time after Jesus's Resurrection as in-between time. When he appears to his disciples on the evening of Easter Day, Jesus's pierced hands and side draw minds back to the Crucifixion (20.20). However, when he breathes the Holy Spirit onto his disciples he points forward to Pentecost, when the Spirit was given to those who obeyed him (Jn 20.22, Acts 5.32). The in-between character of the Easter season is brought out clearly when Jesus appears as an embodied person in the world, but isn't subject to the laws of nature that govern other human bodies. Jesus passes through walls and locked doors (Jn 20.25-8), and at the house in Emmaus vanishes from the sight of his companions, whom he'd accompanied on the road (Lk. 24.31).

These miracles draw our minds back to how Jesus's body has already broken the normal laws of nature. All four gospels refer to the piercing of his side on the cross by the soldier with his lance, to make sure he was dead. We might be so used to hearing this callous act described that we think little of it. However, when we take more time it seems clear that what follows is a miracle. Jesus had died on the cross some time before, perhaps about three hours previously, if his body needed to be removed for the start of the Passover festival. If this is true, then blood couldn't have flowed out of it in the way described.

One explanation for the blood flow is that, although Jesus most certainly died on the cross, the Holy Spirit didn't depart from his body and it therefore remained, in some sense, still alive. As

the Psalmist suggests, Jesus was severely punished although not given over to death (118.18). This idea is behind the tradition in the Orthodox Eucharist of mixing hot water with the wine, so that the mixture people receive from the chalice is warm. If the bread is freshly baked this might be warm too. This also suggests that, although Jesus died in his body on the cross, the life of the Spirit didn't fully depart from him. Peter and Paul both proclaim to their hearers that God didn't give Jesus's body over to corruption (Acts 2.24-8, 13.34-5; see Ps. 16.9-11). The warm life of the bread and the wine, on our lips and in our mouths, remind us that, faced with the power of the Spirit, death couldn't keep hold of Jesus even when he was still on the cross.

As we meet together to share the Eucharist, we might well identify with Thomas in his need to feel with his own hands the wounded body of Jesus before he could believe in him. There's something about the Eucharist, because it uses material bread and wine, that connects us with the physical, tangible side of our faith. However, Thomas isn't granted his desire straightaway. He has to wait a week, until the Sunday after Easter—today, in fact—when he joins the other disciples for worship. Jesus again appears, as he did the week before, and allows Thomas to touch his hands and side (Jn 20.26-8). Thomas then acknowledges Jesus as Lord and God.

At some point, Thomas became identified as a doubter. Rather than accepting the testimony of his fellow disciples about Jesus's Resurrection, he wanted to assess the physical evidence himself. If Thomas was indeed a twin, as John suggests (20.24), we can perhaps understand why physical closeness and touch were so important to him. They'd been part of his life even in the womb. Like Benedict of Nursia and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who were also both twins, Thomas wanted to get close to people and be fully in contact with their life.

What Thomas asked for and obtained, we cannot have. Christ no longer walks about on earth available to be touched, having ascended to the right hand of God (Ps. 118.15-16). Indeed, Jesus's remark to Thomas after he has granted his request, that those are blessed who have not seen him but believe, seems to be directed at readers just like us, giving reassurance as we persevere in the faith. Yet when we gather together for worship, Jesus still comes among us in word, Spirit and his eucharistic body, providing the testimony, teaching and physical contact that he brought to his disciples that Sunday after Easter twenty centuries ago. Through these, he inspires us to be a kingdom of priests, blessing others as he blessed his disciples at his Ascension (Ps. 118.26, Rev. 1.6). With Christ we do not die but live, recounting the deeds of the Lord to those who will hear (Ps. 118.17).