



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday of Easter

**Acts 4.32-35**

**John 20.19-31**

Next week I will have been writing these Reflections for exactly a year. If anyone had told me that then I would not have believed them. For me certainly doing this has been a form of praise to God. Many of you have been kind enough to tell me that you have been enjoying them. I cannot reply to you all personally on Facebook so I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been following them.

I thought the religious television coverage over Easter was quite good this year and I particularly enjoyed the Messiah, which though often performed at Christmas, was designed as an Easter oratorio, this together with Easter from Kings and the performance by the choir 'Tenebrae.' Tenebrae actually is a service held in Holy week. I remember one such service vividly during my years at Queen's college. During the service all the lights were gradually extinguished, the music was beautiful and I remember singing ave verum corpus with the choir. The service was different from the ancient service and was based around the Passion of Jesus.

Easter day was so beautiful this year it was wonderful to roll the stone from the tomb in the Easter garden on Easter morning. Mum and I were able to celebrate together this year. Hopefully next year life will be back to normal and I will be with you all once more.

The sun is a symbol of resurrection and the Celtic peoples had a legend that the sun danced for joy in the sky on Easter morning. I remember mentioning this in a sermon and afterwards Francis O'Gara, who you know was Irish, told me that her father always used to take them up into the hills on Easter morning to see if they could see the sun dance. The Bronte sisters, whose father was Irish, while walking on the moors above Howarth swore they saw this very phenomenon one Easter Day. Whatever the truth of this the symbolism is beautiful.

The readings for the second Sunday of Easter I have always found particularly moving. Mary Magdalene has told Peter and John that the tomb was empty; they run to it not knowing what to expect but find what she says to be true. They have NOT seen Jesus yet though we are told John 'believed.' Mary of course waits and through her tears sees the risen Lord. Her world is turned upside down in an instant, sorrow is turned to joy, weakness to strength. That is indeed the power

Jesus has over lives then and now! She runs and tells the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.' I wonder just what they made of those words.

Our gospel reading begins, 'It was evening on that day' the disciples have shut the doors, "for fear of the Jews." They have seen what an angry mob can do and Jerusalem is crowded with the very people who had cried out for their master's blood. Their lives had been ruined, their hopes dashed. Peter himself was still smarting from the denial. They were broken men. That night their minds must have been in tumult. On that Friday their world fell apart as they watched Jesus die but now the empty tomb gapes wide and Mary's words 'I have seen the Lord,' ring in their ears. What did it all mean? Had some of his earlier teaching begun to come back to them now? We can imagine their confusion and sorrow but also hope.

What happens next is wonderful, suddenly Jesus is with them. The word 'the doors were locked' has a double purpose, yes it is to keep out the Jews but no one can get through a locked door. Jesus does however, he is suddenly there. He is there in reality, he is no ghost. That is important. This is the resurrected Lord. This is a real body.

The first thing he says is so significant, "Peace be with you." It is in part shalom, the traditional Jewish greeting. Actually the word shalom has a deep meaning in itself, it means to wish someone wholeness, wholeness of body, mind and spirit exactly what the disciples need just now. But Jesus by his words of peace does not just wish it he achieves it for the disciples. His words give the deep peace of Christ. It is the power of God and it calmed their fears and restored them. Just as his 'peace' had stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee, so now it stills the tumult within each one of them. This is echoed by the words of the peace in our own Easter service

Notice the next thing that he does, <sup>20</sup>'After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.' The point is that he shows them the physical marks of the crucifixion. He is literally saying, 'I am he; I am no spirit I am your Lord.' There is no more doubt, 'Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.'

As I read through the words of the service of first light on Easter day I read the traditional readings. They begin with the Old Testament readings showing God's saving love for his people the Jews. The story of God's covenants with his people reaches its culmination in Jesus Christ. His is, 'The blood of the new covenant shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.' The saving work of God will continue outwards from Jesus' teaching to the world. Jesus has begun God's new creation which his followers will help to bring to fruition by taking his message to the world.

'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

The words about sin mean I think that they take the love of Jesus and it is through belief in him that sins are forgiven. The most important thing here is that Jesus breathes on them. References to the breath of life are numerous and so important in the bible. This is from Ezekiel 37,

<sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'

Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Such a short sentence but such a huge thing has happened. It is really, breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' The disciples have received the Holy Spirit. Think of their task, a few poor men sent out to bring the good news to all people. Sent out to continue the work Jesus began. Could the broken and cowering men from a few minutes ago have achieved anything? Of course not but as with Mary in an instant their world is transformed, they are

transformed. They are strong with Jesus' strength. Then he gave them their commission "As the Father has sent me so I send you," It is because the Holy Spirit is within them that they fling open the locked doors and proclaim the risen Lord.

Thomas we are told wasn't with them.

<sup>24</sup> 'But Thomas (who was called the Twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

That infamous comment has echoed down through history and earned him the tag, "Doubting Thomas." Poor old Thomas, it is at this point that we should stop and ask how we would react to that news. It is also worth remembering that when Jesus heard the news that his friend Lazarus was ill Jesus said,

'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' But 'Thomas who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

Thomas is the one who wants proof positive, but then the other disciples have had that.

<sup>26</sup> 'A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.'

So his very words are repeated to Thomas, Jesus was not there but he knew all about it. Jesus is the omnipresent God, of course he knows. Jesus searches our hearts and knows each one of us intimately. He knew Thomas' character. He knew the man intimately; he knew his actions and words now would strengthen Thomas, as his words later to Peter at the lakeside would restore him. As Jesus stood there with his arms outstretched I believe, that part of the gesture was the open arms of forgiveness. How deeply ashamed Thomas must have been.

Some time ago now I watched a series of programmes called 'Painting the Holy Land.' They followed the Easter story through art and an artist visiting the Holy sites was the commentator. One picture shows Thomas' meeting with Jesus, it is by Caravaggio and Thomas is putting his finger into Christ's side. Actually it does not say he did that. There is no need, he is too ashamed of those former words. Thomas reacts by saying, "My Lord and my God." Thomas is the first disciple to recognise and publicly affirm the risen Christ as, "My God". His life is changed forever in that moment. What happened to him afterwards is in part unsure, tradition has it that he travelled widely proclaiming the good news, eventually reaching India. It is pretty certain that he was martyred for his faith. It is absolutely certain that his life had been transformed forever.

From this moment these men are no longer fugitives, cowering in fear of their lives. But are empowered and transformed. In the ordination service the bishop asks several questions of each person to be ordained. Each question carries a huge responsibility to carry through life as a priest but the answer given to each is 'With the help of God we will.' The disciples could not carry that huge responsibility without the help of God, without the empowering of God's Holy Spirit, the Strengthener, and Sustainer. Neither indeed could we!

Jesus had breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Thomas had turned to Christ as God. We too confess our faith in Christ as God echoing the affirmation that Thomas made to the risen Lord. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' We have not seen

but we confess our faith in Jesus our God. At the Eucharist we receive the same Spirit and the same commission. 'As the Father has sent me so I send you.' When we say the words "May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others and may we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world,"

The reading from Acts is a wonderful one it deserves to be read through carefully, I am quoting it in full.

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup>With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup>There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup>They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.'

These are Easter people; they are the new followers of the way, the first fruits of the disciple's commission. These are men and women whose lives have been transformed. This must be the pattern of our lives and our church life. We must follow Christ's commandment 'love one another as I have loved you,'

May our lives be transformed, as were the disciples when they met the risen Lord Jesus and may we like them remember your commission, 'As the Father sent me so I send you,' so that we can carry Christ's love out into the world.

*'Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you. Deep peace of Christ to you.'*

Traditional Gaelic blessing.

~~~~~