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Acts 2:14a, 36-41

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20: 19 –31

DOUBTING THOMAS?

Sermon by Bruce Barber

Most of us over 45 are likely to recall attending Church in the days before the now almost universal adoption of the lectionary, accompanied as it has been by a more rigorous recognition of the liturgical year. More often than not in earlier days, we were subject to the prejudices - the vagaries even - of the presiding preacher. I speak as such a one. So it was a significant gain to receive these gifts a little before the inauguration of the Uniting Church.

But as with the passage of time where most good things are concerned, there can be some losses as well as gains - something which today's gospel asks us to recognise. For the gospel of John which we have read today reminds us that although the lectionary is based on the liturgical calendar, that calendar itself is a construct derived primarily from the chronology of the gospel of Luke, where the strategic confessions of Lent, Easter Day and Pentecost are given their allocated extended places.

On such a reading - understandably so as the Creeds apparently confirm - Easter Day is made into one more object, as if it is the case that in addition to believing in everything else, Easter simply offers another item of belief to be added to the Christian sack of beliefs. The persistence of such a view highlights for us the perennial danger of separating out that which the gospel today is asking us to hold together so that, consciously or unconsciously, we will not leave the ministry of Jesus and Good Friday behind us, viewing Holy Week merely as the sad and unfortunate prelude to what turned out to be alright in the end.

These observations - assertions perhaps - lend some weight to the caution which needs to be exercised as for us the Church year never ceases to describe its apparently inviolable circles, making the seamless robe of the gospel appear something like zipped on panels, each of which can be taken off and examined in isolation.

I imagine that this remark - if not anything which preceded it - could well be received as being reasonably provocative. It is justified I think - in view of the radicality of the gospel of John to offer an alternative reading to the conventional. For we can scarcely ignore the fact that in the gospel today - which is the first occasion of the common meeting between Jesus and his disciples this side of the Cross - that this occasion is simultaneously the Johannine Pentecost and the disciples' commission for mission. No forty days here. But this is precisely the brilliance of John's grasp of Christian faith.

Indeed, things are even more radical than this, for John unfolds the gospel in such a way that Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Day, Pentecost and the final judgement all coincide. They coincide in the unity of the figure of Jesus.

Rather like a fly wandering backwards and forwards without regard to the linear sequences of the calendar hanging on a wall, so John reverses the sort of time lines

which we lay out like a row of bricks. Think, for example, of the patent temporal absurdity in this gospel of Jesus' cryptic utterance: 'Before Abraham was, I am'. That is to say, John is concerned to allow Jesus himself to reveal the significance of every temporal and spatial metaphor - not our so frequent tendency to first have in our mind a series of particular images which we believe we must then subsequently attach to him - images which the vast majority of our contemporaries have decided are increasingly problematic.

You know how it goes: every Easter it can be guaranteed that the Good Weekend or the Compass programme will trot out the tedious and futile question: Did Jesus rise from the dead? to accompany the similar Christmas question: Was Jesus born of a virgin? Last Saturday was The Australian's turn. Both questions are apparently lent a certain contrived seriousness by the insertion of the redundant adverb 'really'. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Absurd as expecting a fish to live in a bowl of air, it seems that we are forever destined to be assailed by questions calculated to expire in the wrong medium. Then, as if that is not enough, before it is all over, we are asked seriously to entertain truly ludicrous hypotheses that, for example, Jesus simulated death and went on to father three children by Mary in India? I do not exaggerate. This is where the adverb rightly belongs of course: Really?

Therefore, would it not be good to do as the Gospel today proposes, namely to understand that the faith of Easter day simply expresses faith in Jesus - not, we might say, as something additional to the person of Jesus, but rather to be simply faith in Jesus himself? That is to say, resurrection faith is the very possibility of anything that could be called Christian faith at all. The difference between these alternatives bears some consideration.

In this difference Thomas is our ally. Thomas, of course, has had a very hard time of it, having been held up to us from the beginning as the patron saint of all doubters. As if the crisis of Christian belief in our day is only a contemporary expression of what has always been a possibility, and for which Thomas is the prototype! On the contrary. Rather is it that Thomas and we ourselves inhabit quite different worlds which must be admitted right from the start if we are to get anywhere, and if indeed we can learn from him what genuine faith consists of.

Let me therefore put it as starkly as possible - our text clearly wants to demonstrate that the doubt of Thomas is not a temporary lack of faith in a miracle of a dead Jesus now purported to have come to life again - which is seemingly that most ineradicable contemporary caricature of Christian faith. Thomas' doubt is rather doubt about the revelation of the crucifixion of Jesus. That is worth saying again. And that is why when the other disciples offer to Thomas the confession - as we in our turn are being encouraged in like manner to make - 'We have seen the Lord', Thomas must needs say: 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and - even more decisively- place my finger in the mark of the nails', and as if that's not enough, 'place my hand in his side: I will not believe.'

As the story unfolds, Thomas eight days later is granted his wish. The significance of that possibility, however, is that, notwithstanding Jesus' invitation to touch, the text is silent as to whether Thomas actually does avail himself of his hitherto non-negotiable requirement. Why is this? What has happened to make that necessity redundant?

It is striking how often the number three assumes significance in the gospel. One thinks of Peter's threefold holy week denial for instance, or of the soon to be threefold questioning of Peter as to the state of his discipleship, or in the Synoptic gospels' of

Jesus' threefold temptation. Three presumably is the number for fullness, for totality. Similarly in this story, we are told that three times the crucified Jesus in his coming to his uncomprehending community says: 'Peace be with you'.

We can scarcely exaggerate the significance of that blessing. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, this word for peace was used to express everything that was conveyed in the Jewish greeting 'shalom'. Shalom comes about when all the alienating divisions between human beings, the creation, and the Creator are destroyed once and for all. This is the peace which Jesus in his ministry had spoken of, and which he was anticipating would come true in the faithfulness of God.

But now, for the very first time - and this is the gospel - this cosmic peace is the reality of which Jesus himself has become the author and mediator. The final crucifixion cry 'It is finished' is now decisively being implemented. The word of Jesus - in which in his ministry that peace was embodied - and which in the Spirit has been incorporated into the finality of his life giving deed - is now coming to pass too for would be followers, paralysed then as now, in our variously locked rooms.

This is why the first words to his community must be the three times offered blessing: 'Peace be with you'. Thus has Jesus' ministry, his death, and the future hope of shalom come to expression in the present experience of the crucified one - which we call resurrection. So the life of Jesus is in this made one with his death.

We must however take account of this: Thomas, it seems, does not finally touch. But Thomas hears. We cannot touch either, but we can hear. In the face of 'Peace be with you', believing Thomas, not doubting Thomas, is the prototype of all Christian believing. All that remains for him - as for us - is the answering recognition: My Lord and my God!

In this way is the blessing multiplied down through the ages, and the promise opened to as many as look for it.

It is understandable then why to the question then and now: 'Have you believed because you have seen?', the only possible rejoinder has to be: 'Blessed rather are those who have not seen and yet believe'. Believe what? The answer must surely be: that the peace of God has been realised in such a wounded way that, so believing, we and all the world may have life in his name.

God grant that singly and together we may grow ever more faithfully into that gift.