

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> April 09, St Gabriel's Family Communion.

Epistle: Acts 4:32-35; Gospel: John 20:19-end

Scene setting: It is the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The disciples are gathered together somewhere in Jerusalem, possibly in the same upper room where three days earlier they had shared that last supper with Jesus. The disciples are still fearful, perhaps news of the Resurrection had already reached the ears of the authorities and even now they were out looking for Jesus' followers. Locked in that room together John paints a picture of men afraid for their lives. Thomas is notable by his absence.

But then suddenly Jesus is among them, locked doors are no barrier to our risen Lord. He first greets them: "Peace be with you" Then he showed them his hands and side. The Hebrew word Jesus uses for peace is "Shalom" This isn't just peace as an absence of stress but a sense of wellbeing in its fullest sense. It gathers up all the blessings of the Kingdom of God, it is life at its fullest and best under the gracious hand of God.

Contrast this with Jesus' final words on the cross on Good Friday "it is finished". Before his death and rising true Shalom was not possible because reconciliation with God had not taken place. But now on that first glorious Easter Day true life with God is now a living reality and so for the first time 'Shalom' that peace of heart, mind, and spirit becomes open to us no matter what our situation; a deep, deep assurance of the very presence of God himself. Jesus talking about peace had earlier told his disciples that he "does not give as the world gives". Shalom then is the supreme Easter greeting and not surprisingly it is included, together with grace, in the opening lines of every one of Paul's letters in the New Testament.

Jesus further reassures them by showing them the wounds in his hands and side, the marks of his passion. This is no phantom or ghost but the crucified and risen Lord, in the flesh, as real and as solid as the person next to you. This is a real encounter. How often are we able to relate to people with scars similar to our own – how important then for our needy and hurting world that Jesus is recognised by his!

The disciples reaction is predictable – "they were glad to see him" I think this is typical of John's understatement. I think they were filled with immediate and immense joy, all

talking at once, to each other; to Jesus there must have been a barrage of questions fired around. What a change of mood and atmosphere, from deep anxiety and fear to sudden overwhelming joy and wonder. (ILLUS: Families of hostages when they're released-US Navy).

But Jesus hasn't JUST come to reassure them. He has come to prepare them for what lies ahead. He sets them apart in a solemn moment of commissioning. "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you." There is a distant echo here of Jesus' prayer in John 17 for his disciples and for all who will believe through their message that reveals the fundamental purpose of the church and that is mission, mission in every generation and every age to spread the Good News of Jesus and 'shalom'.

Lets move on to Thomas now. Forever known as 'doubting Thomas' an unfair label since he became an extraordinary ambassador for Christ, even as far away as India where he gave his life for the gospel. For whatever reason Thomas is absent from this first encounter, but what John communicates to us is Thomas' hardened attitude towards the Resurrection. "Unless I see it with my own eyes I won't believe it." It's easy to forgive Thomas because his is an attitude that we find ourselves so easily slipping into. We live in world scientifically advanced and driven by technology. It's a world that increasingly demands hard evidence before accepting anything as fact. But even the greatest scientists are beginning to acknowledge that there some things that are just beyond the boundaries of pure human reasoning or understanding. As I pointed out last week there is an overwhelming body of hard evidence that points to the truth of the Easter story. The resurrection is a fact. If anyone has told you differently they themselves are either misled or failed to grasp the whole truth of scripture.

But faith and doubt do go hand in hand. The tragic situations in the world today do not cause me to doubt – they may cause me to despair of mankind, but not to doubt God. Personal situations, relationships, seemingly unanswered prayers, these cause me to doubt and that's when I'm tempted to cry out to God "unless I see it with my own eyes". That's when I really need God's shalom; when I need to really trust in Him.

For Thomas the situation changes when the disciples are again gathered together and wonderfully Jesus is suddenly among them, but this time he directs the conversation

towards his doubting follower; “come, touch me, see the marks on my body, put your hand where the spear pierced my side”; Thomas doesn’t need to! He just falls to the floor and whispers that great cry “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus receives Thomas’ worship and responds “blessed are you because you have seen and believed how much more blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!”

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it beautifully “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” We have the greatest resource in eternity at our disposal for our mission, the Holy Spirit, breathed on us by the Risen Christ, we have the witness and evidence presented in the Gospels “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” as John puts it and we have our mission. An encounter with the Risen Christ is where faith is born; the church of the living Christ is where faith grows and matures.

Let’s not be like the disciples were in the immediate aftermath of Good Friday, locked away in a room, afraid of what we know, let’s not be like Thomas was in our attitude but ready to proclaim my Lord and my God. In what ways do we need to grow and mature in order that we might be bold to proclaim our Risen Christ – our Lord and our God!

Amen.