

## Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Reading                      John 20:19-31

                                     Acts 4:32-35

### Reflection

John's Gospel offers some wonderful insights into the message of Jesus and what it might mean to follow the way of Jesus. It is not meant to be taken as an historical document, rather it draws on the Jewish mystical tradition and should be seen as something to explore and through which to discover new depths of meaning.

In Chapter 20 the author helps us to explore resurrection through a series of stories woven around some wonderful characters, Mary Magdalene, Peter and the beloved disciple and Thomas, often referred to as doubting Thomas.

Some people are taught to believe it is wrong to have doubts, they are made to feel it is a sign of weakness to express doubts about belief, or talk about our failures or fears. They would see Thomas as bad and reject Thomas because doubts and uncertainties frighten them. Doubts and uncertainties can be frightening but they can also help us grow in faith and understanding.

Thomas is a practical, concrete sort of guy. Earlier in John's Gospel, it is Thomas who insists that the disciples accompany Jesus when he goes to Bethany, a place he'd had to leave under threat of being stoned. It is Thomas who in the midst of Jesus' long farewell discourse, speaks up, cutting through Jesus' mystical, poetic and downright baffling language. Jesus assures his followers, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places . . . where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going," to which Thomas replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas is plainspoken and gutsy. He wants to understand what's going on, and be able to face the situation at hand.

So where is Thomas that first Easter evening when the other disciples are hiding in the upper room? Is he faithless, separating himself from the community? Remember, Mary Magdalene has told the group that she has seen Jesus. Maybe Thomas can't imagine hiding when someone has just reported seeing Jesus alive. Perhaps he is trying to find out the truth. Or maybe he is the only disciple with enough sense to recognize that this hiding thing could take a long time, and that he'd better go out and get milk and bread for the group.

This third resurrection story in Chapter 20 builds on the essence of the first two which is that there is no body. The other disciples have had an experience the week before when they sensed Jesus with them in a locked room where they are hiding in fear. Four things happen – reassurance, encouragement, empowerment and love. "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." They tell Thomas about it and he is doubtful, and wouldn't you be? A week later, the same thing happens and Thomas is there, and the experience overwhelms his doubts and he knows.

The outcome of this experience was an uprising of fellowship, an awareness of oneness which then and now makes a nonsense of religious difference. Paul grew to be aware of this with his famous neither Jew nor Gentile speeches. It was this uprising of fellowship based on reassurance, encouragement, empowerment and love which was at the heart of the early

church and we read of this in the passage from Acts. The notion of the first being last and the last being first is not about a reversal of importance, but a recognition that in oneness there is no first and last, we are interdependent and truly need each other.

In Acts 4:32-35 we have the model of the Kingdom, no one claiming private ownership of possessions they are all held in common; there was an implicit belief in the resurrection, people were graceful and grace filled selling what they had no need of to provide for the welfare of all and this meant no one was in need. In a way as amalgamated churches we are modelling the kingdom in some small way, we have let go of the notion of possessing and entered a way of common life. We have made a start but we are not yet there and so we need to keep exploring what it means to be this new church just as those early followers of Jesus had to explore what it meant.

Together we have hope because together we can reassure one another, encourage one another, empower one another and let love overcome fear. However we have to learn to let go before we will truly understand and realise the kingdom within us. Thomas asked questions but he also allowed himself to be open to new ideas, to know God we have to let go. We have to let go of our independence, or security and our certainty.

Story – The problem of letting go

In the beautiful blue of the Mediterranean there is a sun kissed island that shines with love and joy. It is a place of sharing and love and few people ever leave the island so generation after generations have lived there happily.

The story goes of an elderly man who realising his death was approaching begged his sons to take him outside into the garden one last time. Once there he lowered himself to the ground and scraped up a handful of soil, a handful of his beloved homeland. Holding it tightly he made his way indoors and legend says that he died shortly afterwards still holding on to the soil.

Released by death the old man approached the gates of heaven where he was welcomed by the angels but as he went to step through the gates he found he could not cross. The angels asked him to let go of the soil in his hand, but he could not and so reluctantly they had to leave him outside the gates.

Over the years they tried many times to encourage him to let go, taking him a taste of heavenly food, or a story of life in heaven but the old man could not let go of the soil of his beloved island and so remained outside the gates.

Then, one day the angels brought someone to greet him, his granddaughter who had lived long and also died. The old man was astounded to see her and as she ran towards him he opened his arms to embrace her and the precious soil fell to earth. Immediately he was led through the gates and there found the whole of his beloved island waiting for him.

Sometimes we have to let go of what we think is treasure to discover the real treasure.

Based on a Mediterranean legend.

Jesus people are not perfect, we are works in progress but we will only progress when we recognise our flaws. The flaw itself is not important but acknowledging it allows us to begin again in the knowledge of God's unconditional forgiveness. That is the love part of kingdom living we are to forgive others and allow them to grow. Kingdom living is not about a private club the benefits are not about us but about what we can thus bring to others. Where can we create a new uprising of fellowship, it may be at work, it may be at home, it may be on the bus or the train at a day centre or even in a church building, our Friendship café is one example but we need to do more if we are to make the difference that we have been released to make. The pattern is the same, reassurance, encouragement, empowerment and love. The resurrection code.

Make the first move, take time to share together, listening and talking for often in sharing fear is reduced, accept each other as you are, recognising areas of weakness but not allowing them to become barriers to oneness. Most importantly be ready to let go when the opportunity to grow arises. There are many things we cling to in fear, convincing ourselves that we are living and obeying the rules. To have life is not to become religious, it is not to achieve moral purity, not to follow the law of orthodoxy instead of love. To have life is to live in the oneness of God letting go and be in love, of love and giving love. That is at the heart of John's gospel and it is I believe an exciting re-interpretation of the message of Jesus, the message of Easter and the true meaning of resurrection.

Psalm 133 (Psalms for a quantum world)

Joy, peace and love  
are the reality of our oneness.  
When we understand this  
new creation becomes possible.

The compassion of empowerment,  
the unity of community,  
these are precious,  
as they always have been.  
When we live in the oneness of the source of all being,  
love overcomes fear,  
freedom overcomes oppression,  
dominion overcomes domination.

A new reality is realised,  
a reality beyond the bounds of time and space,  
a reality of eternity.  
Life everlasting in the love of God, source of all being.

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