

## Easter 2, Year A, 2008

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3-9. Blessed be the God and Father.

John 20:19-31

I spoke to my niece last week. How are you? OK thanks, all the usual stuff, you know, (I might have used another word than stuff). And then in the background I heard her husband, a confirmed atheist say sarcastically: usual stuff, Christ risen, and all that.

Christ risen, so it's all OK. Hunky dory and we can all get on with being nice to each other as Christians are.

But no, Christ having risen is rather a challenge.

- **Think of Peter.** He was the special one chosen to receive the Keys of the Kingdom, but he was also the one who abandoned Jesus when Jesus was most alone, denied him three times. Now after the resurrection he has to confront the man that he denied, he has to confront his past attitudes.
- **And today Thomas.** Jesus is risen. *Oh yeah, sure he is. Show me. Prove it.* As a result of the resurrection, Thomas has to confront his cynicism, his doubt, his unbelief.

The Easter experience – new life – means that we **all**, like Peter and Thomas, must confront uncomfortable truths about ourselves. The Risen Christ forces all our baggage, our guilt and shame, to the surface. The Resurrection means having to confront who we actually are.

Think how ashamed Peter must have been to have to look into the face of his lying. How ashamed Thomas must have been to have to confront his disbelief. How ashamed I was to see a student's mother in a wheelchair, when I'd always assumed he'd invented her as an excuse for poor results.

The thing is that, having been brought up sharp to the reality of shame, Peter and Thomas, and I, are accepted.

We are forgiven. The great thing is that the reality of Peter's denials, and Thomas's doubt are not in the least condemned by Jesus. Peter **is** the rock on whom the church is built. Thomas's need for evidence **was** affirmed by Jesus.

I like the Thomas story: it gives us permission to question. I like questioning and pushing at boundaries to see how elastic they are. We need to explore. And the reason is that, unlike the Jews for whom the Messiah is yet to come, for us Christians the Messiah came 200 years ago. Jesus' message might be the same today as it was then, but the context is different. We have to apply the message afresh for the situation that we're in. We're mistaken if we think that the message must be applied now as it was then, or 200 years ago, or last month, or even yesterday.

I'm interested in architectural history, and when I was young, I joined the Victorian Society as a life member, which you could do then for not a great deal of money. I still am interested in it, and still am a life member. But if I could resign my life membership I would. I don't like the way the Society opposes reasonable schemes for Victorian buildings, often undistinguished churches and railway stations, that would make them more suitable for today's needs. This is preservation gone mad. The mediaeval builders didn't work like this: if you go to St Alban's, or Southwell, or Lincoln Cathedrals you can see different styles next to each other as the masons worked in the then current styles without any attempt at preserving the style of the original.

The church is a conservative organisation. We can all be guilty of wanting it to remain like it always was. The thing is, it has never always been anything. And there's a danger that we church people are like the Victorian Society: wanting things to appear to stay the same in the pursuit of some idealistic romantic dream. That was not Jesus' way: there was nothing romantic about flights to Egypt, childhood in Nazareth, stomping around the Judean desert, the blood and gore of torture and crucifixion. Like him, we live in a messy world and we must confront it and get our hands dirty. Like Thomas we need to ask questions and push at boundaries to see how best to put our Lord into action.

**Why must we?** Look around: what will the church be like in 10 years' time if we don't do some fresh thinking for the needs of the world in which we live? There are some difficult questions.

- Why do people who say they believe in the resurrection – more than half the population, it seems – avoid coming to church?

- Why is it that when the church is full for a funeral, we assume that everyone knows the Lord's Prayer, when they clearly don't?
- How do we deal with people for whom terms like *Holy Communion* and *Eucharist* are meaningless, even the word worship devalued?
- How do we deal with people for who associate eating flesh and drinking blood with horror video games, zombies and vampires?
- Why are churchgoers seen as set-apart, clubby and hypocritical?

We need the courage to ask questions and seek evidence, Thomas-style, and then act on it, Jesus style. Through Thomas's desire for truth, the spirit created a living faith in that once-doubting Apostle. In the first reading, we see that the Spirit led many of that group into living faith, and when a body of believers *truly* believes, others also will be brought to faith through their witness. When we act on what we believe, perhaps others will be brought to faith through our witness.

I'm sure that people need something to fill their inner void. They go to football matches and pop concerts for it. They go to shopping centres in an attempt to let retail therapy fill it. The trouble is, I strongly suspect that we will never be able to fill it unless we've seen it, confronted it, and found the top of the bottle, as it were.

This means letting the resurrected Jesus point out to us those assumptions and behaviours that we used to have, but now are embarrassed and ashamed about. Like Peter, like Thomas, like me.

Thomas said 'My Lord and my God', submitting his life to Christ. Let **us** use Thomas's words to submit to Christ more deeply, more openly, and in a way that is more responsive to the situation in which we live – NOW.