

## Sermon 19.4.2020 (Easter 2; Doubting Thomas)

1 Peter 1.3-9; Acts 2.14a, 22-32; John 20.19-31

‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’

These are extraordinary times. And, like all extraordinary times, they have done much to reveal ourselves to ourselves. One of the most prominent lessons we have learned from the spread of Covid-19 is how profoundly dependent we are upon one another. We have found ourselves to be vulnerable to each other’s uncovered mouths and unwashed hands; we are reliant on each other’s caution and carefulness. We have discovered, in the mundanities of stepping aside on the pavement or sneezing into our elbows, our own power to harm or to protect. All of us have been asked to give up something of our day-to-day lives in the interests of the most vulnerable – and, my impression is, the vast majority of us have been willing to do so.

All this has demonstrated the reality, and the urgency, of our common humanity, the one body with many members. It is easy to mistake atomisation for independence. The rising number of people who live alone, the weakening of traditional community bonds, the decline of the nuclear family – they cannot mask what we share, our interdependence and our vulnerability.

But this body of many members has nonetheless been deeply wounded. There have been well over 100,000 deaths from Covid-19 worldwide and many more who have passed through traumatic sicknesses or painful isolation. The number who mourn, who fear, who are lonely is many times higher still. And such large numbers can mask how personal these sorrows have been. Just one death marks the most terrible loss and pain for the bereaved.

We have had revealed too – in starker terms than we are used to – the profound injustices of our society. People with houses and gardens are having a different lockdown from those sharing small flats. For many, any kind of home is a luxury and lockdown is an impossibility. People in wealthy nations with well-funded healthcare systems have different life chances from those in poorer places. Meanwhile, those working in the service industry cannot escape infection by working from home and those on short-term contracts cannot rely on sick pay. Different ethnic groups have vastly different rates of infection and death. Our wounds are both physical and social.

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The Gospel reading is a story too about a wounded body, still bearing the unhealed marks of torture and execution. And it takes place in a locked room, as a household of disciples stay fearfully indoors – although it’s reprisals from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that they fear and not, of course, a virus.

When Thomas is told by the other disciples that they have seen Jesus, he does not ask to see his face or to hear his voice in order to check his identity. What he needs to verify, very specifically, is his wounds: ‘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,’ Thomas says, ‘I will not believe.’ It is not, or not merely, that Jesus has risen that Thomas cannot believe, but that he has risen wounded, that even this Resurrected body that can appear in locked rooms still bears the marks of crucifixion.

Later, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he was carried up still with his wounds. A broken and wounded human body, however transformed, was honoured – as the Nicene Creed affirms – to sit at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

These are some of the most profound things we share with Jesus: not only the taking of flesh and the dwelling among, but the wounding too, the intrinsic vulnerability of our bodies to violence, sickness and infection.

And what the story of Thomas's doubt, and Jesus's Ascension, tell us is that we share something else with Jesus too. Our wounds, our infections and sicknesses, our vulnerabilities, our past failures and humiliations, are not rejected by God, they do not make us unworthy, they are not to be shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven. Nor do they simply vanish on contact with the divine. Rather, they are capable, like Christ and in Christ, of transformation and ascension. We will be able to take our place, broken and wounded as we are, in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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And it is our calling to be agents of this Kingdom. Christianity is a religion with little time for squeamishness. We are called to address wounds – whether bodily, social, economic or spiritual – precisely because they are in need of transformation.

When Jesus appears to Thomas, he invites him: 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

Christians have long felt called into medical service, setting up hospitals, clinics and surgeries, called to touch and heal wounds. I was deeply moved by a well-known article by Harold Braswell, a Jewish academic, who spent time working in a convent hospice in Atlanta, Georgia. He described how the nuns 'tried to see Jesus in every patient they cared for', quite literally visualising the risen, wounded Christ in the bodies of the dying, even, or especially, those who were mean, or nasty, or hardest to love. And the nuns wanted the patients to see the wounded Christ in them too.

The effect was to bind them at the deepest and most vulnerable levels of their existence, in the recognition of how suffering was shared, by the dying, by the nuns and by Jesus himself. This was a hospice, not a hospital, their goal was not to heal but to comfort, and it was guided by reciprocity, their shared woundedness.

What Braswell realised was that, above all, this practice of care was Eucharistic. Just as bread and wine could be spiritually transformed into the broken body of Jesus, so too were those men and women transformed even as they sickened and died.

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The Resurrection represents the audacity of Christian hopefulness: the possibility, the inevitability, that sin, injustice and death, against all the odds, against all experience, will be overcome. I think that as a body we are suffering but I can see too that this shared suffering has bound us together. Many are sick or dying or mourning – and still more are doing what they can to ease the burden, staying inside, washing their hands, volunteering their help, Skyping, Facetiming, and Zooming their loved ones.

The last few weeks have shown us that collective action in the interests of the vulnerable is possible on a global scale, that not only can we unite as a body but we can do so in order to care and protect. We will not manage to eradicate sin or death, we will live out our lives in human bodies that will age

and sicken, but we can transform our shared vulnerability into care for the weak and mourning, we can be agents of the Kingdom of God.

Our wounded body, the body of all believers, can be transformed like the body of Christ, through recognising the wounded Christ in each other and the wounded Christ in ourselves.

Amen.