

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EASTER 2 YEAR B 8 APRIL 2018

Popular tradition has been rather harsh on Thomas. ‘Doubting Thomas’ has become a description of someone who won’t accept what other people say. But that’s only part of the story. When the risen Christ does appear to Thomas in the company of the other disciples, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” This is the fullest statement of Jesus’ divinity on anyone’s lips in the entire gospel. In fact it is the climax of the gospel, bringing it full circle. You may remember how John’s gospel starts:

In the beginning was the Word...the Word was God...the Word became flesh.

Thomas recognises the man he has been following for three years or so in this world is God, as the opening of the gospel, set in eternity, states. Thomas now believes. Doubt has disappeared.

There is a balance between personal faith and community faith. Thomas can speak of my Lord and my God, but the setting is the second appearance of Jesus to the group of disciples. And Jesus refers to the future community of faith when he says,

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

This probably reflects our own experience. I hope we have a personal faith, but it is likely that this faith developed in the context of others who believe – maybe members of our family, or other members of a church with whom we were in touch. We may wish that we could have a direct experience of the risen Christ, as Thomas did, but Jesus says that those who have not seen yet come to believe are blessed: blessed in a way that Thomas was not.

The gospel reading suggests two consequences of Jesus’ resurrection. The first is the giving of the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit is Jesus’ continuing presence in this world in the lives of his followers. The account given in S. John’s gospel is different from S. Luke’s account in the Acts of the Apostles, where the Spirit is given fifty days later at Pentecost. But it’s a difference of timescale rather than meaning. The message S. Peter gives on the day of Pentecost is, ‘Repent and be baptised and you will receive forgiveness of sins.’ In S. John’s account Jesus breathes the Spirit on his disciples and says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them...”. Forgiveness is the second consequence of Jesus’ resurrection.

Again there is a balance between the personal and the communal. Each of us is given the Holy Spirit, God’s presence in our hearts, but having the Spirit means there is a common bond between

us. Each of us receives forgiveness of our sins, but to practise forgiveness we need other people. If the only people we forgive are ourselves we won't be very likeable!

So the church is a community of people filled with the Holy Spirit, receiving and practising forgiveness. Have a look around. Have a look at yourself. Is that true? Perhaps the best we can say is that this is the ideal towards which we should be moving. The church on earth is not perfect. Recently the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has heard of incidents and institutional failings that should never have happened – though the church is not the only institution which has fallen short. And on a smaller scale, any parish church which practises Christian love will attract a number of people we might term 'difficult'. I include myself in that assessment. Should a church carry on forgiving people who think they can get away with anything? One hopes the community is strong enough to support all its participants. We must hold out the possibility of change – change for which we pray, change which is empowered by the Holy Spirit – change which is in fact the experience of resurrection. The risen Christ appeared in bodily form to his followers, but his presence in our hearts and in our community is at a deeper level. If the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord, our joy should be even greater – and that joy will sustain us as we try to be faithful – as we seek to make Christ our Lord and our God.