

Seeing is believing
Psalm 150, John 20:19-31
3 April 2016

A woman stands in the witness box being cross-examined at a criminal trial.

-“Did you actually see the accused near the crime scene?” – she is asked.

-“Well, no, not as such. But I know it was him, because my neighbour, who knows him, told me that he was going there that morning.”

-“Objection!”- pipes up the defence lawyer- “Hearsay”.

And the judge allows the objection.

-“I believe in the resurrection of Jesus” – says a 21st century Christian.

-“Why?” – asks his non-believing friend.

Depending on the particular Christian, several answers may be forthcoming:

- “Because my Mother taught me, and I believe her.
- “Because the Bible says so, and I believe that’s the Word of God.
- “Because it is preached in my church and our minister is such a nice man.

-“Hearsay!” – says the friend and he repeats Thomas’ famous words –“Unless I see some tangible proof of it myself I could not possibly believe it”

There is a lot of ‘hearsay’ about the resurrection stories in the New Testament. All the Gospels record the resurrection, but their accounts vary greatly and to their credit neither the writers nor the later editors try to harmonise them. It is left to successive generations of readers to make of it what they will. According to Paula Gooder in her book *Journey to the empty tomb (Canterbury Press 2014)* the stories roughly fall into three categories: encountering the empty tomb, meeting the risen Jesus near the tomb and meeting him somewhere else away from the tomb. The first two categories are there to testify to the wonder of the resurrection itself, whereas the third one, experiencing the risen Christ away from the tomb, seems to serve as a commissioning to the disciples to carry on with their Master’s work. The common

feature is that they all hinge on the question of what is seen and what is believed.

As illustrated by our introductory scenes, our world – both legal and everyday – sets a great store by what is seen. Our eyes are very precious to us; seeing is one of the ways in which we comprehend the outside world and it is tempting to think that it is a fool-proof way of making sense of reality. Who can argue with the facts? – we would say. My eyes are telling me how good it is that you are all here, in front of me, sitting in your chairs having come to worship. Fact. Or as I was coming to church my eyes were telling me that the daffodils on the roadside were flowering beautifully. Another fact. But then some other person looking around here this morning may see the empty chairs because Easter is over and a number of people are away. Still fact, yet a different perception. And another driver coming the same way I did this morning may be sad to see those daffodils bashed about by the recent high winds and being almost over, and surmise that all beauty is transitory. The same fact with different perception. So why do we see things differently? Well, perhaps because seeing is not just a mechanical process, we see things through the mirror of our previous experiences, through our memories, through the kind of people we are. We don’t just see with our eyes, we see with our minds, with our hearts and, in fact, with our whole being.

And this is, why in matters spiritual – just as in matters legal – ‘hearsay’ won’t do. It certainly didn’t do at the first Easter. This becomes clear in the sequence of events as John the gospel writer presents the story. When Mary Magdalene first brings the news to the disciples ‘I have seen the Lord’ and gives them a message from Jesus, nobody believes her. Nothing changes, the frightened, guilt-ridden disciples remain huddled together behind closed doors not knowing what to do next. The same thing happens to Thomas, who misses the first personal encounter between the disciples and the risen Christ. When they tell him, and keep telling him, ‘We have seen the Lord’, he cannot take their words for it. He needs to see in his own way, with his own eyes, with his own whole being.

For me the good news of this story is that Thomas is embraced in his individuality. Not separately from the others – and this is important, - but in a way that satisfies his particular needs. He is allowed to see what he needs to see. Maybe that is the point of all those diverse resurrection stories. The Easter message is not

addressed to people in a generalised, abstract, one-size-fits-all manner. Christ came to his followers in the concreteness of their situation, in the concreteness of their being. Then he imparted to them his Spirit, God's Spirit, the same Spirit that moved him out of his carpenter shop, the same Spirit that drove him into the wilderness, then led him up and down the dusty roads of Galilee explaining to people his vision of God's Kingdom, the Spirit of compassion, that guided his steps towards the sick and the needy, the Spirit of wisdom that filled his teachings, the Spirit of resolution and endurance that upheld him on the way to Calvary and above all the Spirit of forgiveness, which was enough even for his executioners.

In more ways than one we are in the same boat as Thomas. I liked the way someone explained why Thomas was called the Twin – it is because he is our Twin and we are his. Unless Christ comes to us in some particular way, a way comprehensible to us personally, we only have 'hearsay' to go by. And that, though it may keep us going for awhile, on the long run, will not satisfy. The second piece of good news is that Christ does come and keeps coming to those who hunger and thirst for him. He will find them in their fears for the future. He will hold them in their weakness; he will assure the guilt-ridden that their sins are not even remembered. He will strengthen those tried to the limits of their endurance. He will lend his light to those wanting to understand more and he will be partying with the happy and those who celebrate.

Yet, 'hearsay' has a role to play. It is true that in the Easter story Thomas did not accept the news about the living Christ through simply being told about it, yet I have a suspicion that after that missed opportunity, he didn't go off on his own anymore, the 'hearsay' witness made him stick to his friends because more than anything he too wanted what they had, to be convinced not so much by a sight, or a touch, but a presence. An affirmation that whatever drew him to Jesus in the first place, was still there intact.

It also has to be said that all of us post-resurrection Christians have been drawn into the Jesus story by some kind of 'hearsay' for that's our only access to the original events. Yet the fact that we are still here, celebrating Easter and worshipping together Sunday by Sunday, means that we have also seen something as well as heard, whether that something was in a person, in an event, or in a sudden connection we made. It means that we have been

touched in some particular way by the same Spirit of new life that the risen Christ breathed on his friends. And as we come to the Table of Thanksgiving we might like to say thank you for that.

And how about the 'non-believing' friend? Our non-believing friends, family members, neighbours, work colleagues, in fact the majority of our country, who all had the benefit of 'hearsay' about Jesus, yet are not convinced by it. In John's Gospel there is no separate Pentecost event recorded. It all happens on the same day that Jesus' tomb is found empty. Easter Sunday brings to the disciples the amazing discovery that God's mighty Spirit, that was so obviously active in Jesus, is available to them as well, just as he promised it would be. And that Spirit is a Spirit of movement. Soon it will propel Thomas and the others out of that locked upper room, into the open and it will do marvellous things with them and through them. They will be heard and they will be seen and they will attract other people to the Jesus who attracted them to himself.

For the outside world is not that different from the world of the 'insiders'. It struggles with the same dilemma that Thomas had, 'unless I see.... I will never believe it'. Except that they are looking at us, wanting to see Jesus' love and peace and generosity in us. How can we live up that? In the year 2000, there was an Exhibition in the National Gallery celebrating the second Millennium of Christianity and Christian Art. It was entitled *Seeing Salvation*. In the exhibition the emphasis was not so much on presenting one definitive way of imaging the Saviour of the World, but showing up the difficulties all the different artists had to overcome in trying to capture the mystery of the Jesus story. The exhibition was a great success, well beyond all expectations and especially among those who do not hold Christian beliefs. The artists had managed to make visible in their work something of what they have seen, something that words could not express. They have all had different visions, all of them partial, but together they had attracted and touched nearly 360,000 visitors in the ten weeks the exhibition was open.

That is our calling too, to make visible something of what we have seen with our individual gifts and talents we have been given. Easter is the affirmation of life renewed, of bare branches bursting into vibrant greenery, of the possibility of new beginnings, the time to see with different eyes and the courage to be seen and inspire faith in the unbelievers, as well as to deepen the convictions of those already committed. May God help us as we do so.