

What a week!

Psalm 16, John 20:19-31

23 April 2017

“A week is a long time in politics” is a saying attributed to Harold Wilson, who was Prime Minister in the mid-1960s, and looking back on last week, we have to agree with him. Only last Sunday we have been rejoicing in the good news of the resurrection within these walls even though we were aware of the increasingly dangerous world outside with potential crisis points flaring up in all directions. But at least we thought, our own country had a reasonably quite time of it with a steady political leadership and some hope for a successful outcome for the BREXIT negotiations. And now we find that within a week it's all changed and we are in for a snap general election, which will stir up everything. Truly, a week can be a long time.

How about our week since last Sunday? I am sure in one way or another we have all been quite busy, but was it affected at all by the events of the ‘joyful Eastertide’ we’ve just sang about, the one we’ve celebrated only a week ago?

Well, our Gospel reading is trying to answer the same question. It contains two of John's four resurrection stories and they are divided by a week, during which on the surface nothing very much happens, yet it is becoming clear that not only life-changing, but world-changing events are afoot. Before we talk about that week, let's just see how the different Gospel writers record Jesus' resurrection appearances. In Mark's Gospel, which concludes at 16:8, nobody sees the risen Christ. The women who discover the empty tomb run away in fear and trembling and say nothing. Matthew and Luke record two appearances each and in John, - as we've just said - we find four different encounters. So, why these differences, these particular number of stories? We've heard the theological answer in last week's sermon: in everybody's life Christ comes alive through different, we could say, tailor-made personal experiences.

However, according to biblical scholarship there may also be another, liturgical purpose behind it all. To appreciate it we have to remember that, the Gospels were written in already existing, worshipping Christian communities and they reflect the particular concerns and practices of those communities. In these early

churches the major religious festivals were observed over a period of 8 days: six weekdays flanked on both sides by a Sunday. As Easter also included two Sundays, in Matthew's and Luke's communities they used the two distinct resurrection stories as focal points for each Sunday and in the case of John's community they could have linked together 2 stories for both of those Sundays. If this is the case, in our current passage we have numbers 2 & 3 of John's four accounts of Jesus' appearance with a week in between the two events, and this is where we are introduced to Thomas, one of the disciples as the main character. It is interesting to note that it is only in John's Gospel that Thomas acquires any significance, in the other Gospels he is only mentioned briefly, as one of the 12 followers of Jesus.

Yet, even after 2 millennia there is no avoiding of Thomas! Whatever year we are at in the three year lectionary cycle, Thomas is always there on the second Sunday of Easter. And because he seems to be understood as the embodiment of DOUBT, though the word never appears in the narrative, we could conclude that faith and doubt go hand in hand in the Christian story from the very beginning. The compilers of the Common Lectionary certainly want to drive home the point by setting this passage permanently for the Sunday after Easter thereby making it one of the most familiar NT stories. So we know what happens. The risen Christ comes to his disciples in an amazing display of peace and forgiveness. He gives them his own Spirit commissioning them to take his message to the world. Then a week later he comes again specifically for the sake of Thomas to restore the broken relationship with him.

What we don't know and can only speculate about is what happens during the intervening week. The disciples had received the Holy Spirit, they have been sent out with the good news, yet they are still there, huddled together, hiding away behind closed doors and they haven't even been able to convince Thomas, one of their own to believe their experience of the risen Christ. So, how did they spend that week? We are told they were overjoyed at seeing their Master again after the horrible events of Good Friday. But the joy didn't seem to last. It would take longer than a week before they could master their courage to venture out and begin to fulfil the commission they've been given. Is there a lesson for us here about the nature of conversion? The fact that for most of us it does not come in a moment of great inspiration, it is more like an ongoing

process taking us step by step into a new direction. That even after we commit ourselves to that new direction we find it safer, more compelling to stay within the boundaries of our own like-minded communities. There is great encouragement in the disciples' story for Christians of all ages: the Risen Christ does not grow impatient with the frailty of his followers, he doesn't discard them as sub-standard material, he doesn't go off to choose some better, more suitable disciples. He deals with them where they are and how they are and then moves them on gently, when they are ready.

Interestingly, Thomas, who is left out of the excitement of the first encounter, is the only one who is already 'out there' rather than 'in here' trying to solve the enigma of the empty tomb. He instinctively feels that if there is any truth in the rumours, Jesus would be out there, in the world, where he used to be in his life time. So, I imagine Thomas, whose fear is overcome by hope, going round the familiar places, where Jesus taught and healed and ate and rested hoping to rediscover something of that magnetic, life-giving presence which was so characteristic of Jesus; And perhaps trying to work out where to go from there, and how to live now without knowing where Jesus was to be found. His instinct also tells him what would identify the Jesus he is seeking, it is his wounds. A glorified, ethereal Jesus would not satisfy Thomas, for him the reality of Good Friday could not be side-stepped; Which is more than can be said for some Christian understanding of those who would like to air-brush the Cross out of the Easter picture.

Just a couple of days ago we heard a news item about the first execution taking place in 12 years in Arkansas in the US. It has brought back something I've read of an anti-death-penalty demonstration in another American state, in Alabama in the 1990-s. A person who was against the death penalty held up a sign, which read "Jesus was executed". But there were some church-going Christians there too, who demonstrated in favour of the execution of a particular condemned prisoner and they took offence at the sign. They argued that Jesus' death could not be called an execution, because it was the will of God fore-ordained from before Creation for our salvation. What a curious, self-centred theology, I am thinking, which dresses up murder in a convenient religious tenet of faith!

That is not Thomas' way. He does not want to forget about Good Friday, quite the opposite. The signs of Jesus' execution will tell him that he's found what he is looking for. And if we want to find

the risen Christ, we should follow Thomas' example and look for the wounds. For Christ will still be found where the wounds are: wounds caused by hatred and jealousy, by denial and betrayal, by rivalry and personal loss, by greed and un-forgiveness. It is in their presence, in attending to those wounds that we might find ourselves face to face with the Risen Christ. And it is in his presence, however fleeting the moment may have been that Thomas is being restored. His humble response: "My Lord and my God!" betrays a far deeper understanding than a simple physical identification of his crucified friend. It expresses the realisation that those wounds actually reveal the very nature of the God, who was in Christ: that is weakness and suffering.

We find the same realisation in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German theologian as he writes from prison before his own execution by the Nazis in 1945. "Only a suffering God can help" he says. He explains how humanity in its distress is looking for a powerful God, yet God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross. And he continues: "It is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering" and what follows from this is that, it is not some religious act what makes a Christian but participating in the weakness and powerlessness of God in the life of the world. This is not an easy lesson to take in. It was not for Thomas or the other disciples so it's not surprising that it took some time for them to work it out. It is still not an easy lesson for us, current day disciples of Jesus. Yet the glorious mystery is that in the midst of immersing ourselves into the life of a wounded, godless world with the Easter message, we find ourselves— as the author of Psalm 16 has found - in the company of the living God, "who will show us the path of life and in whose presence is the fullness of joy."

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church