

Talk from 2nd Sunday of Easter - 23/4/17

Readings: 2 Acts 14a, 23-32 and John 20.19-end

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Happy Easter!

Some of you will know that Mark and I have returned from a pilgrimage. We walked for seven days carrying a heavy wooden cross through rural Leicestershire, South Lincolnshire and Norfolk to Walsingham. Along the route we enjoyed the generous hospitality of many people in churches, community halls, farmer's barns and even people's living rooms. Methodists, Catholics and Anglicans hosted us.

You might be surprised to hear that what I ended up appreciating most about the pilgrimage was the sheer physicality of it - it was gruelling at times. But because it was done as a team, I seemed to be able to hang on in there. In some situations in my life it is easy to drop out and retreat to my own space, without it affecting anyone else but not on this pilgrimage. Everyone had to pull their weight and share the load.

So carrying a cross as a group brought home to me in a very real way what it means to be the body of Christ where everyone matters and everyone needs to be committed 100%. Walking on the road as a group meant we were classed as a slow moving vehicle, so we had to wear hi vis jackets and obey strict instructions from our road leaders - communicated through blasts on a whistle, verbally or by hand signals.

But the fruit that sprang from committing to that week of discipline was the pure joy of making and completing a shared journey.

In Acts 2 we witness Peter addressing a large multicultural crowd on the day of Pentecost. He has made great strides on his journey from disciple to apostle. He is making an important announcement. He is declaring the opening of a new era.

God has raised Jesus to new life.

Death couldn't hold Jesus down.

How come bumbling Peter has become so articulate, so confident that Jesus is alive and active in the world? It's because he has hard evidence. 'We are all witnesses to this fact', says Peter. Jesus is no mere ghost or figment of his imagination. The resurrection isn't something that happened in the disciples' heads and thoughts.

Jesus has appeared among different friends and disciples at unexpected moments in real physical form. Women have clasped his feet, Mary has hugged him. Jesus has broken bread, fried fish and eaten with the disciples. Jesus has invited Thomas to touch the wound marks in his hands and side.

There is something really reassuring for us in these solid encounters. Jesus has a real resurrected body. It seems important that the scars of the nails were still visible in Jesus hands and the mark of the spear in his side. I mean - shouldn't God have been a bit neater and tidier, and erased Jesus's wounds completely in his resurrected body?

The visible scars say to me that Jesus hasn't shrugged off the pain and suffering he went through, in a 'Been there, done that' sort of way. He stays in solidarity with us in our weakness by retaining signs of his wounds. Listen to what Rowan Williams says about this:

'The resurrection is not about the wiping out of our history, pain or failure, it is about how pain and failure themselves may yet be transfigured and made beautiful.'

Now, please forgive me if this sounds trite, but talking of scars reminds me of blisters. In a funny sort of way I didn't really mind when I got my first blister on the pilgrimage. It made me feel like a real pilgrim! We had this blister tracker page in our pilgrimage guidebook where we could draw in our blisters on empty outlines of our feet. I have to say Mark got more impressive footsores than me. And the people who didn't get any blisters kept quiet about it for fear of sounding smug.

You see, scars tell stories about significant things that have happened to us. The pilgrimage proved to me that human bodies can be weak and hurt, but they can also be amazingly resilient. Bodies are pretty amazing at times.

The gnostics were wrong to say that material things are bad and spiritual things are good. Because when God finished creating, he declared everything he had made to be very good - the material world, the sea, the rocks, plants, animals and trees, and the people. Jesus came into the world as a human baby and died a human death. God honours materiality.

Living as resurrection people means believing that created things, our bodies and our environment are good and are for looking after and protecting now. And whether we are feeding the hungry, taming an allotment, caring for people's needs or keeping ourselves fit and healthy, Jesus sends us onwards with the words, "Peace be with you" !

Jesus friends had locked themselves in for fear of the Jewish authorities. I have this picture of them all sitting gloomily around a table. But what strikes me next is that in their bereavement they have stuck together as friends to support each other - so their physical gathering is a sign of hope. (just as ours is here this morning) .Maybe they are encouraging each other with stories about the wonderful things Jesus did and said to them while he was alive. (Just as we do too).

Jesus came among them with words of peace.
He even breathed his spirit into their very bodies.
It's as though their bodies were becoming Christ's body.

We are post-pentecost people.
The Holy Spirit has been poured out so we too can become the body of Christ serving each other in the world.

Christ is made known wherever hope is shared, good is done, help is given in concrete ways. I'm going to finish with a wonderful prayer by St.Teresa of Avila that sums this up beautifully.

Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which he sees,
Yours are the feet with which he walks,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.

Just remember - our bodies, with all their potential and despite all their limitations, can do beautiful things to bless others.

I wonder what your blessings to others look like?

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