

Easter 2

St Mary's Barnes, 2017

Imagine you are at the theatre watching a drama about some heroic figure from the past. Then at the end as the lights come on a screen comes down with the words written on it. "Now go and be a hero." That, I think, is how we are to understand the relationship between the story of Jesus's life as told in St John's Gospel and its final verses which we have just heard, when the risen Christ says to Thomas "You have believed because you have seen me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet have believed." St John's Gospel was written to show that the eternal word of God really did become human in Jesus and through faith in him people can have eternal life. As another Johannine writing puts it "We have seen it with our own eyes, we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands: our theme is the word which gives life." But what about those who never had the chance to see Jesus in the flesh? What was to happen when the first witnesses to him all died? It was this question that the writer of the Gospel had in mind. For John's Gospel was probably written about the turn of the first century when those who had seen Jesus in the flesh were no longer alive and it had in mind that a new situation when people would come to believe not on the basis of sight but in response to what they heard read and preached; when Jesus was no longer a localised presence but a guiding, strengthening spirit in their hearts. In fact we could say that those words to Thomas were written quite specifically with us in mind and every congregation in history after the first Christian believers in mind. "Happy are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The word happy could equally well be translated blessed as it often is. "How blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." We are those who are happy, we are those who are blessed.

St John's gospel comes to its culmination in the statement of faith by Thomas "My Lord and my God". Everything leads up to this from the first words "In the beginning was the word, though the word was made flesh, and the whole return to the Father through crucifixion, resurrection and

ascension and the coming of the spirit. But that statement of faith by Thomas is one which Christians down the ages have come to share. The distinction between the faith of Thomas and our own is not between seeing and believing, as is sometimes thought but between two different ways into faith, believing on the basis of seeing and believing without seeing, with the latter being affirmed as no less valid than the former.

But perhaps we feel we don't have that full blooded faith, rather we are full of doubts and hesitations and questions, that we are a bit like Thomas before he believed. So lets be quite clear, questioning is good, perhaps even essential. For how can we come to a mature faith without first questioning a childish one? How can we come to a deeper understanding of God without first discarding some very limited or misleading notions we are bound to have picked up somewhere along the way? Nor should we be frightened of recognising what is true in the views put forward by our sceptical friends. Of course so much anti-religious rhetoric put forward today is shallow and silly. But where there is truth we must face it. As the remarkable French philosopher and mystic put it once " 'Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.' Or to take one specific example, if we face up to the anguish and suffering of life it takes us I believe to a God who himself has shared that anguish; who has let that suffering and evil fall upon him, who is with us in all the circumstances of our lives and who gives us hope in the fact of death. Faith and questioning go together, they are not alternatives. Indeed for a person like Jonathan Sacks faith is above all a form of questioning.

There is a prayer I have always liked which goes "Regard not our sins but the faith of the church." The faith is the Church's faith, or rather it is the faith of Christ himself in his church. The degree of our personal conviction in relation to different elements within it may vary at different times of our lives but the faith of the church remains. When our faith is strong others are supported by it; when the candle burns low others provide the light. And this leads on to a final point.

Christianity does claim certain things to be true but we respond to these not isolation with the top of our heads but as part of a way of life, of a commitment. T.S.Eliot wrote of those occasional magical moments when we are taken out of ourselves. For example

Music heard so deeply

that it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts

Then he continues

These are only hints and guesses,

Hints followed by guesses; and the rest

Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

To have faith is to go out into the day putting ourselves into the hands of God, praying that we may be a blessing to others and they to us, knowing that his spirit will guide and strengthen us and through learning to love will form Christ within us. To have that faith is indeed to be happy, to be blessed. For after life itself is not that faith the supreme gift. My housemaster at school once said to us, "Boys, the most important decision in life you make is the person you marry." That is indeed crucially important, if marriage is on the cards, but is there not something even more important?-the decision to relate out life to our creator and redeemer?-to live the life set out for us by Christ, the life of faith and hope and love? But this way of life includes questioning, even radical questioning for this is often how we come to a deeper understanding. So let us warm to those words which have us directly in mind.

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