

Sunday 23 April 2006: The Second Sunday of Easter

‘Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed’. And that means us.

Readings: Acts 4. 32-35; John 20. 19-end

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day. They are very hard acts to follow, and afterwards there is an inevitable sense of anticlimax, so it's not surprising that the Church's calendar calls today Low Sunday. The choir isn't here, the Vicar has gone on holiday, the old Associate Vicar has left, and the new one has gone off to Wales. All you've got is one of the Liz's and a sermon from the non-stipendiary. It might have been a better to have stayed outside and watched the London Marathon.

Except that ... Except that something has changed. Things are different now from how they were a fortnight ago, because Jesus died on Good Friday, and rose again on Easter Day. Something happened to the disciples, as they lived through the events of Holy Week while they were unfolding a couple of millennia ago, and something happened to us too, as we re-enacted and re-experienced those events over the past couple of weeks. And the whole world has become different because of those events, irrespective of times and dates and places. What happened changed things, and the change is made permanent and ongoing because we carry about with us, in our consciousness and in our culture, a memory of those events, which we reinforce by the annual rituals and liturgies that we participate in, and which help to keep the memory alive and fresh in our minds.

One thing that happened was the trauma. We were traumatised. It was a bad experience. On Maundy Thursday Jesus had his last supper with his friends, but someone we had thought was his friend betrayed him, and, when he went out onto the Mount of Olives after the supper, he was arrested. Then he was brought to trial, and convicted in what was by any standards a monstrous perversion of due process, and someone we had thought was his special friend denied ever having known him. And then we saw him being humiliated and tortured, and then executed in a particularly brutal manner, and his body taken down from the cross and laid out in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. All very nasty and very upsetting, and not the sort of thing that anyone can expect just to walk away from. Except that avoidance is one possible option, and in today's Gospel reading it's the option chosen by St Thomas. What Thomas says is "Jesus is dead and gone, and that's the end of the story", and he doesn't want to have to think about it any more, which is an understandable response to any traumatic experience, particularly one involving a death; forget it, and move on. But that's not where today's Gospel stops. Thomas isn't allowed to get away with avoidance, with pretending that none of it happened. He is required to reach out and touch Jesus's actual wounds. Think about it. Having to touch an open flesh wound.

And another thing that happened is that we were bereaved. Someone very close to us, someone very special to us, died. In the Easter Gospel reading, which immediately precedes the St Thomas story in John chapter 20, Mary Magdalene goes, early in the morning, to visit Jesus's tomb. She expects that she will be comforted in her bereavement by carrying out the required rituals, bringing all the prescribed things and performing all the appointed little tasks, and just being beside the body as a means of expressing the grief that she knows she is at risk of being overwhelmed by. Again, a common and an understandable reaction, something that we want to do when somebody very close to us dies. But, once again, this isn't how the story works out. She finds the tomb empty, she asks someone whom she thinks to be the gardener what has happened, and she looks again and recognises the risen Jesus. But the risen Jesus

tells her not to touch him. Why? Why, if Thomas is told that he must touch Jesus's body, is she told that she mustn't? The Jesus whom Mary Magdalene used to know, who used to be a flesh and blood human being, isn't a flesh and blood human being any more. He has changed, and therefore he can't be touched. And Mary Magdalene has to change too. From now on she is going to have to do without the real live interaction that she used to have with him, and the real live physical contact which it's possible to have with another human being, and from now on her relationship with him is going to have to be different. Think about it. Not being able to touch someone you love. It's like what happens after anybody we've been close to dies; instead of being able to interact with them like we used to, we have to carry about within us the memory of them, and the idea of them. There is a shift in responsibility. The use that we make of the person who isn't there any more, and the value that we derive from the relationship, is now entirely up to us. There may be invasive recollections, but we can choose not to revel in them, or be overwhelmed by them. The responsibility for deriving value from a relationship with somebody who isn't there any more, and for deriving an ongoing value, starts being entirely up to us.

But the loss that we experienced during Holy Week went beyond bereavement. There's also a deeper sense of loss, because the Passion Story is also a story of a failure. The disciples who congregated around Jesus, the thousands of them and not just the twelve, were enthused and excited by the message that he preached, and by the miracles that he performed, and by the ways in which he interacted with all the various people whom he met. It seemed to them that the things that he said, and the way of life that he represented, were capable of transforming both them and the world around them, and that the future was one of hope for a better life, and for a better world. This was how Holy Week began on Palm Sunday. But on Good Friday that hope was dashed. All those of us who have, in our day, campaigned for good causes that we passionately believe in, are able to identify with this disillusionment, having to recognise that the powers-that-be still wield the powers-that-matter, and that they're bound to win out in the end, because might is right, and that our own personal belief in what is good, however passionate, isn't in itself going to bring about nirvana. So the loss that we experienced isn't just the loss of a loved one, isn't just the loss of a hero, it's also the loss of hope, the loss of the hope that things might be about to become better.

But there's also something else that happened. We survived. We're all still here. Because of the Easter ending to the Passion Story, things turned out alright in the end. Thomas's initial reaction, and Mary Magdalene's initial reaction, are both shown to have been unnecessary. Thomas is able to take on board the awfulness of what's happened, because Jesus's wounds can be touched. Mary Magdalene doesn't lose what she thought she had lost, because Jesus is still there, even though she can't touch him. We're stronger than we think we are. We are capable of surviving. We can survive trauma, and we can survive loss, and we can survive disillusionment. We are all still here, and we are that much stronger as a consequence, because, in order to acquire what is truly valuable, we have to experience the loss of what we had previously valued most.

But there's yet another dimension to the Holy Week story. The Passion Story isn't just about the other people who were there at the time, or, by extension, about our own participation in the events as we re-enact them, and make parallels with them in our own lives. It's also about Jesus himself. On Palm Sunday he rode into Jerusalem and the crowds cheered him and waved their palms and shouted "Hosanna"; it might have been the beginning of his greatest triumph, but it wasn't. People, and the system, let him down. On Maundy Thursday he was arrested on the basis of information bought by the authorities from one of his closest friends, and his very closest friend denied three times ever having known him. He was convicted on testimony which he knew that the authorities knew to be false. And he was humiliated, and he

was tortured, and the crowds which had earlier shouted "Hosanna" shouted "Crucify him". Betrayal, denial, rejection, humiliation, pain. And then he was executed in a particularly brutal sort of way, and with his mother looking on; not the sort of ending any mother would have wanted for her son. One of the things which always strikes me about the Passion story is that, at almost any moment in it, Jesus could have got himself off. He could have said something, or done something, which would have satisfied the authorities, and which would have allowed them to allow him to walk away unscathed. But he didn't; he chose not to. He allowed the events to take their natural, or unnatural, course. He accepted all the wrong inherent in the shadow side of human nature. He allowed himself to be the scapegoat on whom all the wrongnesses became focussed. He bore the pain of everybody else's wrongdoing. And in choosing not to opt out, in allowing the events to take their course, he required the perpetrators of that wrong to do the wrong that they had it in them to do. And at the same time he required them to live with, and to go on living with, the knowledge of what they'd done, and of what they were. The doctrine of the atonement isn't an easy one. We don't just get let off. We have to live with the full knowledge of all the wrong things that we've done, and all the wrong things that we're capable of doing. Good Friday and Easter are hard acts to follow, because of what we now know about ourselves.

But it's alright. We have survived, and we can go on surviving. We can touch the wounds that we've inflicted. We can manage the grief of loss, including the loss of our hope that things might have been better than they are, that we might have been better than we are. And we can manage all this because of the resurrection. Jesus may not be around as a physically alive person any more, but the idea of him lives on, and we have just as much access to it as Mary Magdalene had. That's what has really changed now that Easter has come and gone.

We could go out and watch the Marathon. We could all tiptoe out quietly during the Offertory hymn, and leave Liz to do the business. But that would be to miss the point. Good Friday and Easter happen only once a year, but the Eucharist happens all the time. The Post-Easter Eucharist, the Low Sunday Eucharist, IS a special one, and it's special because of the anticlimax, since it reminds us the resurrection wasn't just a one-off a couple of millennia ago, and that it isn't re-enacted just once a year during Holy Week and Easter, but that it's an ongoing, ever-present, unavoidable, reality.