

Sermon Easter 2 Year B 2018

Well, what a marvellous Easter we've had together! So many elements seemed to have come together to make this really quite memorable, for me at least. And I sincerely thank all of you who so faithfully and prayerfully contributed to our celebrations, up front and behind the scenes, in large ways and small. One of the strands or threads I hope you might have picked up over our holy week observances was a sense of pilgrimage, of making a journey. And so, on Palm Sunday - with the church festooned with palm branches - it was as if we were at the gates of Jerusalem following our Lord as he made his way into the Holy City. Then on Thursday night the church was prepared as if for the Last Supper, where feet were washed, and we then made our way to the altar of Repose, representing the Garden of Gethsemane. Then on Good Friday we followed our Lord in his final hours and our journey brought us to Calvary. Finally, on Easter Sunday, we welcomed Christ bursting out of the tomb and charged with carrying his light and life out to the world around us.

Many people rock up on Easter Sunday imagining it says it all. But for those of us who took the opportunity to journey through from Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday night, Good Friday, Holy Saturday through to Easter Day know that each has a particular emphasis, each captures different aspects of the saving mysteries. We make it a journey because all that God has done in Christ cannot be contained in one celebration. God's saving action cannot be limited to one way of saying things, to one principal image, to one moment. The Passion, the Cross and the Resurrection are *all* part of God's saving work, and we can perhaps best make sense of it by approaching it as a journey.

The journey the church has invited us to share in over this holy time reflects a deep truth: *that faith is a journey*. And it is this sense of unfolding knowledge, of gradual insight - of a movement from uncertainty to confidence, the journey to faith and believing - that we now trace in the Easter season. The Gospel writer John gives us two resurrection stories - stories of unfolding insight - each with two parts centring on various responses to the resurrection, and how faith in the risen Christ comes about.

The first story focuses on Mary Magdalene which we traditionally hear on Easter day; and its correlating story of how Peter and the 'other' disciple come to believe the resurrection. The second story focuses on Thomas. Its corresponding story is on how the ten in the upper room come to believe the resurrection as we hear laid out for us today, this second Sunday of Easter. Now, these four experiences of the risen Christ are not randomly selected by the gospel writer. They are chosen and told here to back up one of the central convictions evident *throughout* his gospel (from start to finish): that there are different types and levels of faith; that there are different responses to the Lord Christ; that faith unfolds as journey.

Throughout his gospel, the evangelist John has shown that there is faith based on signs - or miracles - (which he has very low regard of) and faith which doesn't need that. There is a weak faith and strong faith. Shallow faith and deep faith. There is faith that grows and faith that falters. In this gospel, faith is not decision made once, but a decision made anew in every situation.

To highlight this - that faith is an ongoing process, an ongoing *decision* - the last 'convert' in this Gospel is Thomas who (we must note) is *already* a disciple, *already* one of the twelve. He has *already* displayed faith in Christ in various ways and settings. In other parts of the gospel is *already* shown to be devout and alert. But in a new setting, in a new reality, on a new day a *new response of faith* is needed. So, this should encourage us and hopefully reshape some of our thinking if we sometimes feel guilty or inadequate if our faith was not born full grown in one dramatic experience. The Gospel writer John is far too aware of variety in the human condition to settle that kind of idea.

But that Thomas had to adjust and change his commitment and faith to a new setting and a new reality and new day highlights for us that faith really needs to change for *us* as life unfolds and changes for us. If the faith we had as a child is the same faith we have now, then something probably isn't right. How we look at, understand, see, experience the world around us changes throughout our lives. Faith should reflect that growth and change.

In highlighting the different possible responses to Jesus, it is almost as if the Gospel writer John is trying to give some sense, some meaning to why the Good News of what God has done in Jesus is rejected by so many. This is the dilemma for the early Christians. Why is the hope of Israel - the long-promised and long-hoped for Messiah of God - rejected by Israel? It's heartbreaking but true. John's simple response: different people, different stage on the journey, different responses. For us too, don't we all want everyone to know, love and believe in Jesus just as we do?! We know the life, joy, hope, fellowship, belonging, healing, peace that can come through faith. We wonder why so many of our loved ones reject Jesus.

Partly, we have to trust that just as we change, as we find ourselves at different stages as we move through life, so too those around us are at different stages. None of us are at the same point on the journey to God. That means we have to be patient and understanding of where others find themselves. We can't judge others by where we find ourselves. But it also means we must be hopeful. Thomas refuses to believe until he has hard evidence. But when it finally comes he offers the *clearest* and *most emphatic* statement of belief in all the New Testament: *My Lord and my God*. Jesus' hope and patience with him won out in the end. And just as we need to be patient and hopeful towards others, so too we need to be patient and hopeful with ourselves. Sometimes we are our own worst critic, refusing to believe that God might have saved us, that God might actually work through us, that God has great things in store for us. We need to trust and believe that indeed, *we will* journey on; that *we will* come to greater faith; that we will grow towards God.

Not everyone takes the same path to faith in the risen Lord. Faith in the Risen Lord unfolds and changes as the world around us and within us unfolds and changes. Faith is dynamic - it changes and shifts and moves. And this essential truth - that faith is dynamic - because of the central Christian belief: Resurrection faith is faith in a person, a person who lives, Jesus Christ. Faith is dynamic because at its heart is *an encounter* with a person; an encounter with Christ. May we ever grow in love, and journey towards and with him who lives for ever. Amen.