

Homily: Low Sunday 2020

I'm sure we are all saddened, if not surprised at the extension of lockdown for a further few weeks. At one level we know it seems to be working and is right, but I'm sure we all long for life to be open and free again. For many people it is a cause for great fear and alarm in case the virus attacks them or those close to them.

So it is not a surprise to hear the opening words of the gospel, 'the doors were closed for fear.' The disciples are hiding in the Upper Room behind closed doors. Although the text doesn't say it, we can imagine that the windows and shutters were closed too. The disciples most likely were sitting in the dark, hardly talking, save for the occasional whisper. They were afraid: Jesus had been crucified –will they be next?

They are probably terrified of Jesus too, as reports that he was risen they knew from that morning, yet most did not believe the story. In Luke's gospel it says they were 'in a state of alarm and fright and thought they were seeing a ghost' when Jesus appears. They have good reason to be scared, because they have betrayed and failed him. The news of his resurrection is tempered by the knowledge of how they denied or deserted him. How will he react?

It is a situation we all recognise. Most of us have betrayed someone at one time or another, even if it was only in a small way. The lockdown can give us a good time to reflect upon so much of our lives.

Maybe we left someone alone in their greatest need, refusing to listen, to open our hearts, to offer a word of support, or a helping hand. Maybe we acted in this way because we thought that we would not see that person again. However, as the gospel text clearly shows, people we have wronged in the past have a way of appearing again out of the blue. One day we suddenly see them, a meeting, perhaps even a confrontation, is inevitable. How will they react to our betrayal and desertion?

The disciples know that Jesus is alive, even if they doubt, and that Mary Magdalen and the others has seen him. But he had not appeared to them in person – could that signify his anger with them?

So there they are, shut in, afraid to move, listening anxiously for any noise or movement, and suddenly there Jesus is, standing in their midst, saying not once but twice “**peace be with you.**” That simple phrase is sufficient to let them know their betrayal and desertion are forgiven, and they are filled with **joy**. Their betrayal has not overcome Jesus. His sense of self-worth is great enough not to let his love for them be tempered by their treacherous behaviour. There is nothing that can undo his love for them and for us. There should be no fear in the new life that Jesus brings, so in our lockdown ‘confusion of life’ let it turn to joy, for the Lord has given us this time to experience his love anew.

Jesus then forgives them and commissions them to forgive. It is good on this day of Divine Mercy to once again throw ourselves at his feet, and let his merciful love wash over us. If we stay close to the risen Lord, no earthly troubles will take his peace from our hearts.

An issue affecting us all these days is **touch**. We are to avoid any physical contact with others as much as possible. We know we all need contact one way or another with people, but the 6 feet apart and no touching can be difficult, especially for those who are very touchy/feely anyway. Again the gospel has something to say to us. St John tells us that Mary Magdalene remained in the Easter garden when Peter and John had gone back home, and she met the risen Jesus. (John 20: 11-18, the section between last Sunday and today’s gospel reading).

During the encounter, Mary tries to hang on to Jesus, Jesus says ‘do not touch me’ other translations have; ‘do not hold me,’ or ‘do not cling to me.’ There has been a debate about relatives being able to be, or not to be, with their dying relatives. NHS staff have tried to reassure them that people dying are, if possible, held by the hand, touched by someone, if in isolation. Once they have departed, life is different (remember the preface ‘life is changed, not ended.’) We cannot cling onto them, we must let them go. Mary wants to keep Jesus with her. We would have thought that now, while he is standing before her, she can indeed touch him and hold him. But no, she must not cling, Jesus must go to the Father. Only then will he come again to his disciples in spiritual and sacramental ways.

Commenting on a famous painting by Titian ‘Touch me not: *Noli me Tangere*, Alistair Sooke wrote this week in the paper ‘Touch me not: who

has not thought something similar in recent weeks while negotiating a cramped supermarket aisle etc. He goes on to say ‘Titian’s painting gives gentle cause for optimism. Yes, it presents a vulnerable, betwixt-and-between moment; Christ isn’t yet ascended, yet new life is here at hand.’ The Lord is risen.

But Thomas, who was not there on the first Easter night is here on the eighth (Octave) night. Thomas seems to have been cautious by nature. We know from meeting him elsewhere how he would see the full cost of every commitment, but for all that he would be loyal to the last. Thomas, cautious but loyal, was surely chosen for the sake of all who hesitate. If Thomas could believe anybody could. All he needed was time. So after a week of growing with the idea, he was ready.

The risen Jesus comes and having said again ‘Peace be with you,’ invites Thomas to touch his precious wounds, showing that Jesus is raised not simply with a body, *but the same body* that was crucified and died only days earlier. He carries these marks of his earthly sacrifice with him even when he ascends into heaven. That drew from Charles Wesley these words

“Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exultation from his ransomed worshippers:
with what rapture gaze we on those glorious scars.”

(from the hymn ‘Lo! he comes with clouds descending: and he drew from Rev/Apocalypse 5: 6)

Jesus on this occasion invites Thomas to touch his wounds. He did not need to, but expressed his act of faith in the great words ‘My Lord and my God,’ This is the act of faith that Jesus calls all of us to make, though we do not see him with our eyes, yet is with us at all times and in all circumstances. The risen Lord bids peace be with you and lifts his hands in blessing.