

Homily by Canon Philip Dyson
Sunday 11th April 2021 - 2nd of Easter
Divine Mercy Sunday

Readings (Year B): 1st: Acts 4:32-35. Psalm 117. 2nd: 1 John 5:1-6.
Gospel: John 20:19-31.

Two people spring to my mind at this time: 20 years ago on 12th April 2001 Harry Secombe died. He was a great singer, comedian, and presenter of Highway, a religious programme of music, song and personal stories. A man of great faith. He found his faith a constant strength through all the stages of his life. He was brought low by the onset of a stroke. He was filmed for TV as he struggled to make a recovery, and spoke movingly and humorously of the difficulties he felt and the dark days he went through. In a final interview in retirement, Harry was asked about his faith in God, and he reaffirmed how it had always been the foundation of his life.

Sitting quietly in a garden, he turned to the interviewer and, quoting the Bible said **“I know that my Redeemer liveth.”** (19: 25) Many recordings of that Aria from Handel’s Messiah: to me none ever more affirmative than that of Dame Isobel Baillie. **I KNOW!**

Harry’s was a simple statement of a deeply held belief, gentle in its utterance, powerful in its meaning. His brother Fred, was an Anglican priest in London, whom I’d met; both men of great faith.

The other person, who died 4 years later, on this eve of Divine Mercy Sunday was Pope St John Paul II. At his beatification he was described as a man of great faith. And the words of the Lord, spoken in the upper room, were repeated: **“Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.”**

In today’s Gospel story the case is strongly made for all those who find it hard or even impossible to believe. Faith in God and acceptance of Jesus is often reached through a process which invariably involves questions and struggles and difficulties. The images of gathering darkness and closed doors accentuate the mood of fear before the presence of the Lord is recognised.

The closed doors, in a sense, contradict the message of the stone rolled back from the tomb. I spoke last week about lockdown and much fear still all around, and that it is possible to be unable to move on from Good Friday. We all have our scars from our own 'Good Fridays' that remain, despite our small experiences of resurrection. Our 'nail holes' remind us that all pain, grief, ridicule, suffering, disappointments and anguish are transformed into healing and peace in the love of God that we experience from others and that we extend to them.

Jesus came and stood among them. His very presence exudes **Shalom**, that peace he had promised them beyond anything the world could offer. Then he shows them his wounded hands and pierced side so they can be sure of his identity.

The one who was crucified is truly risen. Jesus tells Thomas and his brothers not to be afraid of the nail marks, the scars, the crushed spirit, the broken heart. Compassion, forgiveness, justice, are his peace which can heal and mend. It transforms, recreates and renews. As Jesus breathes on them and says 'receive the Holy Spirit,' St John clearly has the Genesis story in mind; God creates man and woman breathing life in them: so the risen Jesus recreates humanity by breathing the new life of the Spirit upon them.

All four gospel writers' mention the spirit at the death of Jesus: Matthew: 'he yielded up his spirit.' Mark: 'Breathed his last.' Luke, 'Father into your hands I commit my spirit, and with these words breathed his last,' and John 'and bowing his head he gave up his spirit.'

In biblical thought, **life**, signified by **breath**, was on loan from the Creator and was returned to God in dying. **The Psalmist in 103** 'You send forth your spirit and they are created. You take back your spirit and they die, returning to the dust from which they came.'

The breath which Jesus returned to the Father is now bestowed on the disciples as he breathed on them. It is in John too, a verse in 7:38/9 'From his breast shall flow fountains of living water. He was speaking of the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to

receive; for there was no spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified.’ It is John who tells of his pierced side, and ‘immediately there came out blood and water.’

Does it all matter? Yes it does, for as ever, our whole faith hangs together in one piece, from Genesis to Revelation/Apocalypse.

It is often said that for those who believe in God, proof is not necessary. For those who do not believe in God no proof is ever convincing. We need to affirm with Thomas, the Jesus who comes among us: the Jesus who is with us always and say, “**My Lord and my God.**”

Canon Philip Dyson

Isobel Baillie, Handel’s Messiah ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’
www.youtube.com/watch?v=pebGi0eBEfE