

3rd Sunday of Easter
Year B - 18/4/2021

Acts 3:12-20
Psalm 4
1John 2:15-17, 3:1-6
Luke 24:36b-48

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There's a reason, I think, that the season of Easter is 50 days long. Actually, there's a couple of reasons. Firstly, it's important. In fact, it's central to who we are as Christians, and what we proclaim as the church.

A now retired Bishop told the story just this week about how he used to interview prospective priests in their discernment process, and how his favourite thing to do was to pretend to them that he was a person who had arrived at their church, and asked them to tell him why he should stay.

His experience was as follows. Inevitably, they would tell him that they were a great community of people who supported each other. To which, he would reply "oh well, I go to AA - I've got a great community support network there. Why do I need another one?" "Well", they would say, "we have beautiful music here - our choir is great, and the organ is lovely". To which the Bishop would say: "My season ticket to the National Philharmonic Orchestra and National Ballet probably gives me access to great music already".

"We reach out to the community around us and help people", the prospective priests would say. "I'm in Lions and Rotary - I do that already..." What he really wanted them to say - in fact he said all that they needed to say was this: "we proclaim Christ, and him crucified; that's the Gospel that is central here." And they rarely did...

Easter is central to our faith, so it's a good thing that it's 50 days long, stretching out to Pentecost, as it reminds us to keep giving that message - we proclaim Christ, and him crucified (and risen!)

The other reason why I think it's important that the season goes for 50 days is that this process of change and transformation that Easter signifies is something that is going to take time. No-one, not even the most self-aware and insightful person is going to be able to turn their life around suddenly, like flicking a light switch. It's hard - and it takes hard, intentional work. So, a 50-day season is a good start to that process, as we reflect in these weeks on the post-resurrection stories of Christ, and the stories of the early church in Acts.

We are meant to be changed by the risen Christ. We are called to be no less than transformed by the Holy One. That's one of the key messages of Easter. We need to repent, have our minds changed, turned around, renewed by our relationship with the Risen One and by seeking to live a Resurrection life. When we hear Jesus' words to the disciples today, we understand that this call to repentance is central to the process of transformation.

We are reminded that resurrection means having our minds and our lives changed by an encounter with the living God and so to be set free from all that is impoverished and fallen short in our nature and life. The Epistle of John says it this way: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

In the rather odd and confronting excerpt from Luke's Gospel today the first half of the passage is about Jesus bearing witness to who he is - a real person; a person whose wounds are able to be touched and seen; a resurrected body, which is hungry, and needs to eat. And the reaction of the disciples is perhaps a little like our own; "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering!"

I get it - I really do. This is not usual stuff. It's fantastic, in the true sense of the word. It's a mystery, and it's one which has occupied the minds of some of the most learned and intelligent theologians across the centuries of Christianity.

Jesus is bearing witness to the disciples about who he is. And he reminds them about everything he has told them; about how he said this was going to happen - *had* to happen. And in a sense, the showing to the disciples of the wounds he still carries are themselves a witness to who Jesus is. Jesus; crucified, and risen.

And then, for the disciples, comes the crunch. Here they are, rejoicing in the presence of their friend and saviour; although still filled with doubts and disbelief, but Jesus has told them all about him, and what has happened. And then he says: “you are witnesses to these things”.

For the disciples, there is no way out now - they would want to remain at a distance; on the outside looking in perhaps, but Jesus has drawn them in; they find their lives so entwined with his that they realise there is only one thing they can do - to go out and bear witness to this astounding news - to tell others about what they seen, and heard, and come to believe.

Now, sometimes it might be tempting for us to think that they did exactly that - that they went out and simply got on with being the perfect witnesses to Christ. But the Scriptures and our tradition tell us a little different story to that. We know that their lives were not perfect; that they were in all likelihood a jumble of joy, but also wondering and disbelief.

So, we can take some comfort, I think, that we know the first disciples struggled with this. They had a hard time believing that this was really Jesus standing before them. That they didn't always get it right. And that the witnesses to the resurrection across the years have been anything but perfect.

Just like us...

Because we, too, are called by Jesus to be witnesses “to these things” - what things? The things of Jesus - the things of God; how God, in Christ, was doing something altogether new and amazing.

And the thing about being a witness is that it is not just about what's in your head. It's never just about believing some theological principles or concepts, and leaving it at that 'head' level. The most learned theologian may not make the best witness if his or her life does not also reflect something of the joy of the message - it's about what's in our heart.

Now as the retired Bishop whose story I began with emphasises, we must be able to talk about this, in as best a way as we can. But it's also about the authenticity and integrity of our lives - how we live with the knowledge and certainty that God can always bring life from out of death; that God can always bring hope out of what looks like despair, and that new life is always possible, even in the most barren and stark of all situations.

We are all witnesses to these things - that God, who "brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ", as the Easter blessing proclaims, is working life and transformation and change within us.

Let us continue to be those witnesses to the resurrection, as Christ continues to come to us, in our imperfection, bringing God's Peace, and strengthening us for our journey ahead.

In the name of God. Amen.