

Sermon for Second Sunday of Easter - 8 April 2018

Readings: Psalm 133
Acts 4, 32.35
John 20, 19-end

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

'Receive the Holy Spirit. if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' With these words, the risen Jesus gives his disciples some of the power that has previously been his alone, power given to him by his Father at the start of his ministry. This is the first appearance of Jesus to his disciples as a group and happens on the evening of what we think of as Easter Sunday, the day that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalen in the garden in the morning and people began to realise that something extraordinary had happened. The man who some had thought to be the Messiah and the son of God but who had been killed by the Jewish and Roman authorities, had somehow risen from the dead.

If Jesus had been the sort of Messiah that so many Jewish people hoped for, a great leader who would take on and defeat the imperial power of Rome, wouldn't his return from death have been the sign that would have convinced the whole nation to join him? Wouldn't it have made more sense for the risen Jesus to march boldly into Jerusalem with his followers, overpower the Roman garrison and overthrow the priestly regime which had condemned him? Yes, if he had been that sort of Messiah. Of course, this is more or less what happened thirty-odd years later when the leaders of the great Jewish revolt did exactly that but, as we know, their uprising ended with the complete destruction of the temple and enormous loss to the population of Palestine. Then a further sixty years on, what is known as the Bar Kochbar revolt saw the final destruction of Jerusalem as a Jewish city, and the dispersal of many of the Jewish people away from their devastated homeland.

Both of these disastrous rebellions were led by people claiming to be Messiahs, yet Jesus, who we believe to be the real Messiah, did something completely different. He did not raise a band of armed followers; he just appeared, out of nowhere, in a locked room with a small group of his closest disciples and said 'Peace be with you'. Could the contrast be any greater?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had made it clear that he had come to fulfil the prophecies about the Messiah and the future of the people of Israel, prophecies contained in the Hebrew Bible, for example, in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. These would have been well-known to

those who listened to him, being read regularly in the synagogues, even, as we know from Matthew and Luke, being read by Jesus himself. But people found that really hard to believe. Many, no doubt, saw him as an inspired prophet and teacher, but not the Messiah they expected to see. They had interpreted those prophecies as harking back to the glorious days of David and Solomon when Israel was at its largest, dominating that part of the Middle East and negotiating with other kingdoms as an equal. Now, for hundreds of years, Israel and its people had been the subjects of other empires, the Assyrian, the Persian, the Greek and now the Roman empire. They wanted their freedom but Jesus did not seem to be interested in that, or at least not in the sort of freedom that just consisted in doing what they had always done before.

They couldn't see that Jesus was offering freedom but quite a different sort of freedom, not freedom to lord it over others, thinking that we are in some way superior, but the freedom to be wholly ourselves. When Jesus appeared in that room, and offered his disciples first peace, and then the Holy Spirit, he was giving them what subsequently every follower of Christ also has if they choose to take his offer seriously. As John puts it at the end of the reading, 'through believing you may have life in his name.' and that is what is on offer, life.

But what sort of life is that? It may not be what we imagine or even what we think we might like. To paraphrase what the speaker said at an event I was at recently, when I go up there and meet God, I might well be thinking I can give a good account of myself, I have been true to myself, but God will look sad and say but why weren't you the John I made, instead of being the John you made for yourself?

Yes, God made us to be ourselves, he gave us all the potential to be something special, all equally special and lovable in his sight, but all too often we think we know better and make ourselves into somebody else. We might, for example, be seduced by those common worldly values of success measured in money and celebrity, we might think we are using our best qualities (usually the ones other people praise us for having) to make something of our lives, again measuring that something by what other people expect, but we may not be living true to the person God hoped we might become. When we think of the saints, or people who have lived authentic spiritual lives, they are often people who at some stage in their lives made that shift from being the person they wanted to be to being the person they hoped God wanted them to be.

I'm not going to pretend that this is easy. Many of us start off with disadvantages; brought up in disfunctional families, following bad examples, living in communities dominated by despair or

violence; there can be many reasons why we have real problems in trying to work out who we are, yet Jesus is always there before us saying 'Peace be with you.' It is not just a wish but a promise, a promise that we can trust God to give us peace when we need it.

You know, the disciples were quite a mixed bunch. They had all sorts of ideas that made sense to them but did not fit in with what Jesus was saying. Some wanted to have the signs of success, sitting on Jesus' right hand; some could not move beyond the conventional idea of the Messiah as a mighty warrior. They had not yet become the people God hoped they might be, yet God did not give up on them. God, in the person of Jesus, appeared to them, and gave them the power of the Holy Spirit to work in his place to bring about the new creation heralded by the resurrection. And what did that mean? Our first two readings give us a clue. Our psalm, written of course a long time before Jesus appeared, celebrates the pleasures of a people living together in unity. Our reading from Acts gives more concrete expression to what living as God intended means - sharing our lives, our gifts, our possessions. We are told 'there was not a needy person among them.' So we can see what 'life in his name', as John puts it, means. Living as a community where those who have willingly give to support those who have not. One could hardly imagine a greater contrast with the way most people live today, stressed, uncomfortable, uncertain about their own futures or the future of the planet, wrapped up in their own selfish little worlds. So as we move beyond Easter and that great demonstration of God's eternal and unconditional love for us all, let us remember that he has promised us that if we allow ourselves to truly believe and put our trust in him, we too will be given both God's peace and his Holy Spirit which will enable us to live fully as ourselves. What greater gift could we receive?

Amen.