

**Shining with resurrection life**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**Jn 20: 19-31; Acts 2: 14a, 22-32**

Some years ago I went with a group of friends to Saltaire in Bradford, the birthplace of David Hockney, to see an exhibition of his paintings. The mill at Saltaire, which houses the paintings, is very large, and there are three floors to explore. Somehow I got separated from my friends and by the time we met up again they had already visited the particular new paintings we had gone to see. My friends reported how beautiful the paintings were, but I felt excluded, shut out from the common experience. Being told wasn't enough- I needed to go and see for myself.

And they were right- I was transfixed by the beauty of the paintings. Hockney had brought an entirely new way of seeing to the Yorkshire Wolds- so they were suffused with a vibrancy and movement and colour which was exciting and captured the imagination.

Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to his disciples and he couldn't cope with just being told about it. He had to see for himself. A pretty natural reaction- second hand experience is rarely satisfactory. Thomas is granted his wish, and he makes the supreme confession of faith- My Lord and my God. It is the highest point of many high points in John's gospel; many titles have been given to Jesus- Rabbi, Messiah, Prophet, king of Israel, Son of God. But it is Thomas who addresses Jesus in the same language that the people of Israel used to address Yahweh. My Lord and my God.

Thomas is confronted with the truth, in all its beauty and wonder, and he believes.

But what about us? Jesus says 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' How does it happen for us? Where does our faith come from? Not everybody learns their faith at their parents' knee- certainly not today. Most of us are not granted a vision, or a miraculous happening. Has faith always been part of your life? How far back can you go? Deep-rooted, life-long faith is precious but it is not everybody's experience. For myself, although I do not think there was ever a time when I consciously did not believe in the existence of God, there was a long period when faith was dormant and it didn't mean much to me. I was brought to my knees by the truth and beauty of the gospel through the powerful witness of one or two people. In them I met the living Lord Jesus.

The living Lord Jesus comes to his disciples- his first disciples, and gives them his Spirit. It is another of the wonders of John's gospel. He binds together the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension. Jesus comes to his disciples and breathes on them. 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' This verse has been called 'the Johannine Pentecost.' It takes us right back to the beginning, to Genesis. 'The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.'

St John's language in this passage is illuminating- he doesn't speak of Jesus 'appearing' or being 'seen'- he says 'Jesus came and stood among them.' It takes us back to the Last Supper when Jesus says 'I

will go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again.' It is concrete language- going and coming. And in these final verses there is no mention of Jesus going away again. He stays with us, through his Holy Spirit. Resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit are one event- an outpouring of divine love and life to us.

Today, we are living beings. Whatever our burdens, whatever our sense of guilt, or failure, whatever our doubts, before Easter- however much we were living, but only partly living, in the words of T S Eliot- now everything is changed. The world may seem the same, but we have the gift of resurrection life. We have been transformed- renewed.

'Receive the Holy Spirit.' We are given, freely, the gift of life, God's life. God shares himself with us; he is as freely available and accessible as the air we breathe. He is the energy, and the experience which is deep enough to hold all other experiences within it, so that we know, beyond any ordinary knowing, that we are safe and alive. We cannot know God as an object- as we do a chair, or a tree, or a scientific fact; we can only know him reciprocally, as another being, as a relationship in which we feel fully known, accepted and loved.

The gift is for everyone- just as air is for everyone. It is not to be controlled and parcelled out. And so our faith is not just for ourselves. We come back to the concreteness of St John's language. Jesus came, he stayed and he sends us out. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' We are consecrated to mission. The peace Jesus offers is not the uneventful calm of a quiet life. Jesus was 'sent' and we know what that sending meant in Jesus' life. When

we offer each other the peace, which we will do very shortly, what are we doing but praying that the deep, inner radiant presence of the Lord may be in each one of us?

Mission is not something to be done with loud-hailers and statistics. It is not about being disapproving of the lifestyles of others, making people feel uncomfortable or in the wrong. Ultimately it is not even about teaching the faith, although such teaching is profoundly important. But it is a truism that faith is caught, not taught. Mission means giving people the opportunity to meet Christ in us.

People are not brought to faith by being disparaged or condemned but by genuine experiences of being loved, of costly attention being paid to them for who and what they are. Paying attention to another person is an enormous gift to them, it is the attention that God pays to each one of us. Jesus showed such attention to the people he met, whom he always began by loving and affirming, enabling them to grow into greater truth and wholeness.

We are called to carry on this work. That is why we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The way we are, the way we live, will be crucially important. We are to live God's life, here in this community, rejecting any attitudes which do not reflect God's love. At any moment what we do or say, how we are, may hinder or allow the Spirit of Jesus to shine in us, may mean that another human being is caught up in the love and the joy, in a life-giving encounter with faith; or the moment may be lost. It is a huge responsibility.

Seeing those Hockney paintings I was drawn, attracted by the vibrancy, the colour, the new way of seeing reality. Well, they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder and David Hockney is not everybody's cup of tea! Which is an important point- demonstrating why mission is not for a chosen few but is the responsibility of us all; we relate to and respond to people differently – we have to shine with resurrection life in our own unique way, so that cumulatively many different people may be attracted. But shine we must, if we are to shed abroad the love of God, so that others may have life, in the power of the Spirit.

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