

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 28th April 2019

John 20: 19 - 31

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, in my sermon I was talking about Monty Python's satirical comedy, *The Life of Brian*. I was reflecting on the way that film, which ended with the crucifixion and the song *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*, should have ended with a satirical scene about the Resurrection. I even wrote the scene that I thought *The Life of Brian* should have finished with. If you remember, when I described it to you last Sunday, no one laughed.

So, I was thinking perhaps I could do better today. This morning the reading from the Gospel of John suggests that the Monty Python team could have written yet another scene to follow the Resurrection scene that I suggested last week; a scene that satirises the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples in a locked room, and his subsequent appearance to so-called Doubting Thomas.

I think the Monty Python team should have included a scene of that passage, which we read this morning. But, there is no need for me or they to write one because in fact the story of Doubting Thomas as it appears in John's Gospel is already funny enough. It is just that, blinded by piety and respect for Scripture, we don't notice the humour.

In this passage, John the Gospel writer describes a scene in which Jesus appears to the disciples and blesses them with peace and the Holy Spirit, and then gives them a commission, sending them out in to the world to continue his work in the light of his Resurrection. This scene is very strange though, and this Jesus is a very strange character. He appears to the disciples in a locked room completely out of nowhere, and these disciples don't appear in the least perturbed by that. I think that has comic potential. Then, he commissions them to do a job - by breathing on them. That's unusual; it is not something most managers do in the office when they are giving you a job to do. That too has comic potential.

But, most of all when these disciples begin their task of continuing Jesus' work and of spreading the good news of the Resurrection to other people, they begin with someone who should be an easy target. Thomas was one of their own number, he had known and loved Jesus when Jesus was alive.

If anyone is going to believe this story about Resurrection, surely it is going to be one of your best friends? If you can't convince him, then how are you going to convince anyone?

"We have seen the Lord," they tell Thomas. I don't believe you, says Thomas. After all the drama in the locked room: the miraculous appearing, the breathing, the Holy Spirit, and the commissioning, in the end the denouement falls completely flat; the mission fails at the first hurdle. There is a lot of comedy potential in that. And, anyone who has ever tried to explain their faith, never mind convince others to also believe, and who has failed can take comfort in the joke; you weren't the first to fail, those first disciples were and in a much more spectacular fashion, and you won't be the last.

Of course, despite this false start, as it turns out the church wasn't still born at its birth by the failure of those first disciples to convince one of their best friends of the Resurrection. John wrote another scene in which following the failure of the disciples, Jesus appears again to do the job himself. And, this time Thomas is convinced. He doubts no more.

But, there is humour in this scene as well, although it is harder to spot because it involves a play on words, specifically the meaning of the verb 'to see'. In this whole passage the words see,

seen, saw, showed, appear seven times. The action in passage relies on the disciples and Thomas literally seeing, or not, the resurrected Jesus. But, throughout the Gospel of John prior to this, the verb to see and its cognitives does not mean to literally see with your eyes, it almost always means to recognise Jesus, that is to understand who he is and to believe in what he is doing.

Miracles where Jesus restores sight to blind people, for example, aren't so much literal healing miracles as much as metaphors for our spiritual blindness. Rather than healing people, Jesus opens people's eyes to recognise his true nature, and to understand who he is, and what he is doing with regard to the world around him.

In the passage we read this morning, these two meanings of the word to see, that is to see someone with your eyes and to recognise who someone is with your mind, play off against each other.

Following the discovery of the empty tomb, the disciples become focused on their need to see Jesus physically, dead or alive, whereas the Jesus who appears to them wants them to recognise and understand who he is, consequently the punch line at the end, 'Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.' Faith, in other words, isn't about empirical verification of the Resurrection, but a recognition that the Jesus who lived and died can live on, still, in our lives and the world to transform those lives and the world around us, as he did when he walked the earth. It isn't so much the case that Thomas doubts and finds faith because he sees the body of Jesus, it is more that he is blind to what is happening, and then has his eyes opened to believe in who Jesus is.

As if to emphasise this, there is in the passage another play-on-words. Both Jesus' declaration 'Peace be with you!' and Thomas' declaration, 'My Lord and my God,' were expressions used at the time about the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor. By accepting Jesus' peace, the disciples reject Rome's, and by accepting Jesus as Lord and God, the disciples reject the Emperor. The Resurrection, in vindicating Jesus' life, is meant to convince the disciples to see who they are, their place in the world, and the nature of the world around them in a completely different way than they had done before. No more are they to follow and to be ruled by the powers of this world; now they belong to a new Kingdom ruled by a new Lord and God.

Today this passage challenges us as well, to ask ourselves how we see the world around us and our place in it. Who are we in this world? To whom or to what do we show allegiance? How should we live our lives?

Those questions are particularly pertinent for Benjamin today. The coming three or so years of his life will be for him particularly formative, and the years following will continue to have a significant influence on how he sees the world around him, his place in it, and to whom he owes allegiance.

By bringing him to be baptised, Sarah and James are making a commitment to bring Benjamin up in a way that will help him to see that whatever he experiences in this world, particularly when life gets tough for him, nevertheless he is loved by God independently of anyone or anything else.

What's more, although as he grows and when he is grown he will, like us all, not be the perfect human being: he will make mistakes; cause others pain; get things wrong, but his baptism will help him to see that these things need not hold him back. He can surmount them by believing in living a loving, peaceful, mercifully just life as Christ taught and lived.

As a consequence of his baptism Benjamin will be encouraged - not expected - encouraged to 'see' God in his life in the person of Jesus Christ, and in his own time to make a commitment himself to following Christ and to becoming a part of his body, the church.

When those first followers of Jesus discovered that the tomb was empty on that first Easter morning, they had to make a choice. Should they remain locked away, grieving and fearful, or should they live as if Jesus continued to live with them transforming their lives and their world. In that locked room amidst their grief and fear they believed that Jesus was there with them despite the locked doors, breathing his life in to them, and they were determined to keep him and his story alive in their lives.

Today, we too have a choice. When we see love crucified, or justice buried, or peace entombed or mercy, scourged in our lives and in our world are we going to lock ourselves away, fearful, doubtful, and grieving for what might have been in surrender to the powers of this world. Or, are we going to see – believe - that the God who loves us, and who in Jesus Christ lived on earth a life of love, and peace, and merciful justice lives on in this world through our collective faith, transforming this world and us, so that whether it is in the lives of new born babies, or in our lives, or in the life of those who live in our cities and countries we will see Christ resurrected and alive in peace reborn, mercy released, justice raised up and love liberated?