

Sunday 8th April 2018
Easter 2 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 4.32-35
NT: I John 1.1-2.2
G: John 20.19-31

Last week we took our post-Easter break in the North East, exploring the Saxon churches and ruined abbeys of County Durham, as well as the odd castle. Apart from the obvious flavour of ‘busman’s holiday’ in our choice of activities, it can be thrilling to clamber over stones and walls which bear the marks of habitation of a thousand years ago. We can stand where religious communities joined in services, and we can look out of the crumbling stonework at the views which remain unaltered since the windows were first built. In the 7th century parish church of Escomb, which is still a place of worship, we can see stone in the walls reused from nearby Roman settlements: clearly visible are grooves from chariot wheels, a Roman altar, and even a stone commemorating the 6th Legion. This is all pretty exciting stuff, and yet somehow I think it was probably more exciting for me to be there than for you to hear about it.

Other people’s holiday photographs are always rather less thrilling than being there oneself, and even if social media posts allow for a slightly brisker engagement with our neighbours’ week on the Costa del Sol than the middle class convention from the 1970s of inviting people round for a slide show, it is still the case that most of us would rather visit a place than rely on someone else’s report of it.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This line from our Gospel does not quite capture the story about Thomas, because it is not just about seeing and hearing, but about experiencing. Listen to this description from our second reading from the First Letter of John: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” This is a vivid portrait of interaction and experience.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” is one of the most difficult sayings of Jesus. Of course we can verify the accounts of some of the things we hear, but that is not really the point. At the heart of this is whether we can truly make something part of our lives if we have not experienced and interacted with it. Holiday photographs are a rather trivial example, but it illustrates that your holiday remains part of your reality, and not mine, however many photographs I see. It is not about trust or veracity, but about experience. The disciples say to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” and his response is not to ask for further corroboration from them, but rather to ask for the experience: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas was granted that experience in a very direct way, and it is the experience for which we must search. Can we really understand an experience just because we are told about it?

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We have not seen Jesus in the flesh, and yet we believe, to a greater or lesser extent. Many of us here are perhaps still searching for the experience, yearning to make an experience of Jesus part of our reality. What Thomas demanded was not just a sight of Jesus but an experience of him. The sight was not enough, or – more accurately – a sight of him was not important, was not real. And it is an experience of Jesus which we look for at the resurrection; it is experience of him, or the desire for it, which brings each of us here this morning.

How we have that experience is something which has intrigued philosophers and theologians for centuries. In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas suggested that knowledge demands an essential likeness between the knower and the thing known. This appeals as an idea, and is easily understood: we more readily understand something in the life of a fellow human than in the life of a dog, because we are able to relate to the sense of human perception and experience more naturally. We can never know what it is like to think and feel like an animal. When we think about how we know Jesus, then we again understand this more easily if we accept that we are made in his image. Jesus was born as the paradigm of humanity, and the resurrection showed that death was no longer the limitation of humanity. We can

be part of the resurrection experience because it is an experience which we share with him: the possibility of new life has become part of our existence as well.

But Aquinas also maintained that knowledge begins with some form of sense perception: in other words, we cannot know God without experiencing him. Now, Aquinas went on to show that the natural world gives proofs for the existence of God, and you may or may not find those arguments compelling in a post-Enlightenment society, but a less controversial proposition would be to say that through the natural world we can experience God. Unless we are particularly spiritual people all the time, our experiences are not daily mystical moments, but rather the everyday life of living in the world and encountering each other. If we are to experience the risen Christ as Thomas did, it has to be in that world which we inhabit, the same world which we also recognize as sinful and rebellious.

Experiencing the risen Christ is unlikely to be in putting our hands in the side of an individual, but maybe we experience the risen Christ by putting our hands in the side of humanity around us. Where there are wounds, let us see them and touch them; where humanity is ripe with emotion, with joy, with hurt, let us be part of it. It is in each other that we experience the risen Christ, and it is through experience that we believe.

Christ is with us always in the world, and our experience of him will be chequered with all the usual attributes of human perception: uncertainty, denial, opacity, and clarity. Sometimes we do not wish to see, sometimes we see it in the wrong way. Perhaps all too often our experience of Christ is one of walking past, refusing to engage fully with what is there waiting for us. Looking for Christ and at Christ is a reflexive activity, because it is in the act of looking that we experience Christ.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Fr Crispin Pailing