

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 5.27-32; Revelation 4.1-8; John 20.19-31

There is a very obvious contrast in our Easter readings this morning. In the first reading from Acts we see Peter and the apostles in front of the Jewish council having been arrested by the temple police for preaching the resurrection of Jesus. Faced with an order banning them from public proclamation they have simply gone on doing so. Peter's response to their accusers has become a model for Christians under threat from those using the law to repress the preaching of the Gospel: 'We must obey God rather than any human authority'. He then goes on to ignore the ban even more flamboyantly by preaching the resurrection to his accusers, 'The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging on a tree...God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour...and we are witnesses to these things'. Boldness, conviction, defiance. This early Christian preaching refuses to be bound by the disapproval of others.

Our Gospel, though, paints a very different picture. Here the disciples are gathered on the evening of the first day of the week. The doors are locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. Now it is possible to make all sorts of connections between these two readings. The usual preacher's ploy is to point to the work of the Holy Spirit in making cowardly men courageous. First they are filled with fear, then they are bold beyond belief. First they are hidden behind closed doors, then they are out in the open braving the worst.

But there is another contrast being played out in these readings; one which resonates with a different aspect of our Christian experience. The Gospel gives a picture of a church in a locked building, locked from the inside. Christ comes to his church, but no one lets him in. He does not unlock the doors or demand that they be unlocked. He simply passes through them in a way no spy or policeman can. And then he brings them his peace and he shows them his wounds. The whole experience is extraordinarily intimate. His hands, his side, his peace, his breath. This is the gathered church of those Christ calls his friends.

The reading from Acts on the other hand is a picture of a church out in the open. In the city, in public, under pressure, preaching its message boldly, witnessing to the risen Christ, engaging fearlessly with the hostility of the authorities.

I see in these snapshots from Acts and John two ways of being the Church. There is the intimate church of the locked building and the engaged church of the public platform. The role of Thomas in the Gospel illuminates this in an unexpected way, for Thomas misses the intimate moment. He is outside the locked room. He does not have the experience of the risen Christ, nor does he grasp its meaning. It is only when he is inside the house with the others a week later that the Lord comes to him, again, through closed doors. And in that place of safety, his closed mind is opened to the truth, 'My Lord and My God'.

Quite a number of us started our Christian journey in a locked room. By that I mean we were brought into an intimate personal relationship with the Lord in a setting which was in some way apart, cut off. We could see the locked room as a kind of nursery of Christian life. Jesus comes from outside into that safe space. The locked room has many manifestations. It might be that kind of doctrinally pure community which gathers people together against the world. On the other hand it might be a faith nurtured by regular retreats, spiritual direction, by the slightly refined and exotic sense of having an extra dimension to Christian faith that others don't possess. This kind of faith in particular finds the kind of bold up-front engagement of the Acts reading quite threatening. Silence and mystery and intimacy are repelled by tub thumping proclamation.

On the other hand the church of Acts insists there is a place for tub thumping proclamation. The church of the Acts reading is out in the open air. This way of being church uses words, a lot of words. It tried to persuade, it has opinions. It interprets history. It interprets the present moment. It enters into argument and is ready to suffer. This is the Christianity of street preachers and Good Friday acts of witness, of Christian solidarity with particular causes. It is Donald Soper in Hyde Park corner. It is a Christian Union mission.

The church of the locked room relates to the church of the open air because even in the locked room there is a sending. Christ sends his disciples as he himself was sent by the Father. But to be truly sent you have to unlock the doors and leave the house. You have to risk all in the market place of ideas and values. You have to be changed by what you see and what you meet, trusting that Christ is already there. Peter's speech begins to show how the Gospel is shaped by being preached – you can just begin to see how he is on the brink of anticipating an Israel wider and more inclusive than the Israel of old. The danger is that the mentality of the locked room protects the preacher from real encounter, so that the talk is always a talking down, an argument against.

The open air church on the other hand does not look for safety. It lives my trust, on nerve and adrenaline. It believes fervently in the message it has to proclaim, which constitutes its very existence. But here can lie a problem. The open air church can become so dependent on its powerful message that it loses touch with its source. The messenger simply becomes identified with the message, so identified with the cause, the proclamation, the argument that it is no longer renewed from within. The wounds of Christ, the peace of Christ, the breath of Christ are taken for granted but not really lived. When those who live in the exhilaration of mission come into the locked room it is only to stamp around impatiently, to sneer and judge, refusing the intimacy of what is offered.

And where in all this are you or I? Or this community this Easter? Our church looks beautiful for Easter with its flowers and lights, a place of comfort and holiness. Many of us are strengthened by the witness of this building as we go about engaged in the tasks at home and work that God gives us, engaged with our own attempts to live the Gospel. Yet this church, unlocked for twelve hours a day, is also a place of extraordinary raw desolation. It is often very cold indeed. The air blows in and so do all kinds of unexpected people. People being sick, people going mad, people out of their heads on drugs and alcohol; bottles, syringes, porn mags. And most of you don't see it, because some of it at least gets cleared up by Sunday.

I hope this Eastertide we may strengthen our roots in both these metaphorical churches. It isn't just a matter of progressing from the locked room to the market place, of the cowardly becoming courageous. It is more find a way of moving from the locked room to the open air and then back again, and out again. Of being deeply engaged with the world, of being ready to proclaim and defend the faith in the public arena and yet still coming back to the mystery of Christ's wounds, his peace, his breath, as though for the first time. If we are faithful to this double vision our mission will be grounded in true contemplation; and our prayer will be open not just to our own desires but to the cries of the world.