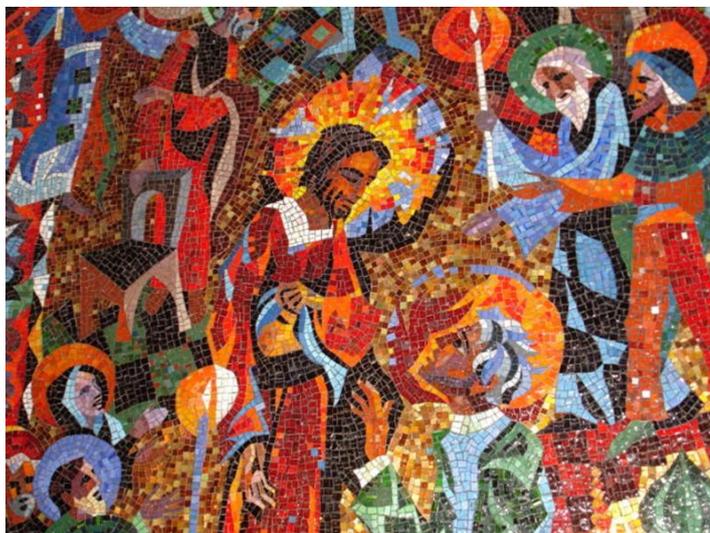


ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

INTRODUCTION

In today's Gospel, we meet the disciples huddled anxiously behind locked doors. How many of us are feeling like that now! Suddenly, Jesus is standing among them! And what does he say to them? "Peace be with you." In the uncertainty, fear and tragedy, as well as the joy and celebrations of our lives, those are still Jesus' first words to us: "Peace be with you."



So, at the beginning of this time of worship, take a moment to collect your thoughts. Become aware of whatever in you is not at peace, and offer that to God's loving care, so that you can be free to meet with Him now, and discover His strong love, and strange peace.

OPENING BIBLE VERSE AND PRAYER

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

(1 Peter 1:3-4)

God the three-in-one, move in us now through your Spirit.
Help us to worship, fill us with your peace.
Help us to learn, fill us with your understanding.
Help us to grow in faith, fill us with your love. **Amen**

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Jesus, light of the world, we welcome you now.

Light of Christ, shine into me.
Shine into the dark places of hurt and pain.
Shine into the dark places of sadness and regret.
Light of Christ, shine into me.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Jesus, light of the world, we welcome you now.

GOSPEL READING

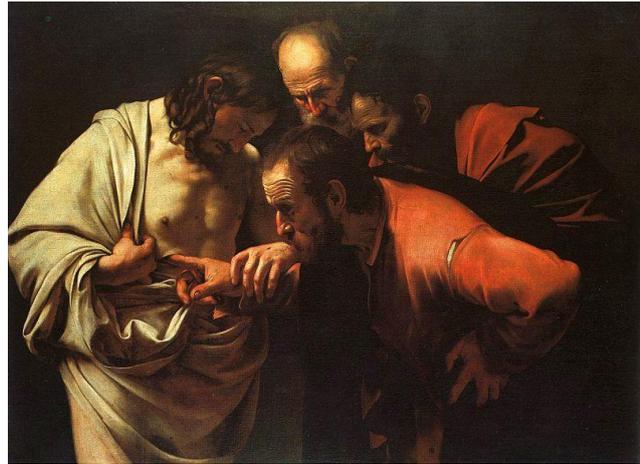
When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.



REFLECTION

It's hard not to feel just a little bit sorry for St Thomas. Fated to become known as the patron saint of doubters; carrying the epithet "Doubting Thomas" down through the ages; the subject of countless sermons warning against the dangers of doubt. Which of us would want to be defined forever by such a single moment?

The wider picture of Thomas in St John's Gospel is rather more subtle and interesting. Thomas is the loyal but slightly Eeyore-ish character who, when Jesus announces he is heading for Jerusalem and certain trouble, says to the other disciples, "We might as well go with him – if only to die!" (John 11:16). And Thomas is the one who, when Jesus is giving his moving farewell speech about his impending death and the fact that he is going to prepare a place for his followers, puts up his hand and says, "Master – we haven't got a clue what you're talking about!" (John 14:5). I imagine all the other disciples were thinking the same thing, but hadn't the courage to ask.

And then, after Jesus' death, we meet the disciples shut up indoors under a cloud of anxiety. (Maybe you and I can associate particularly well with that situation?) There are some wild rumours circulating that Jesus has been spotted – alive! Thomas, perhaps tired of being cooped-up with the other disciples, has popped out for his daily permitted exercise or to take a trip to the shops for essentials. He returns to find the others mad with excitement: Jesus was with them, only a few minutes ago! If only Thomas had returned a bit sooner!

Thomas is having none of it. Perhaps he couldn't understand why, if it was true, Jesus would have chosen to appear at just the time Thomas was absent? Perhaps he suspected that the others might have got carried away without his steadying influence to keep them in check? Perhaps he simply knew how easy it is to be deceived by what you see? For whatever reason, he is unconvinced. Of course he challenges! Of course he wants more evidence! Honestly – wouldn't you and I have done the same in his place?

But more than that, too: Thomas recognises the need to touch the Risen Lord, to know him as flesh and blood still. One of the things I think we are all missing at the moment is the chance to touch others – to shake hands, exchange a hug. How important to us as humans is that sense of touch! That need, that yearning is surely part of what drives Thomas to say, "Unless I touch with my hands...."



The fact is, doubt is not always a failure of faith, but can be a natural and healthy part of the growth and development of faith. The Christian life is a journey, not a standing-still, and if the Bible makes anything clear to would-be seekers after God's truth, it is that the journey will sometimes take them through dark places. The Israelites must tramp through a path-less desert on the way to the Promised Land. Following the Good Shepherd "beside still waters" and along "right paths" (Psalm 23) is no guarantee that those paths will not lead through "the valley of the shadow of death". Jesus' disciples are warned that to follow him will mean walking the way of the cross.

The arrival of doubts can be a sure sign that this journey is happening. The Christian is not standing still. Old realities are being outgrown, new truths are emerging. God is always bigger than our understanding of Him, and doubt – as uncomfortable as it is – can be just the impetus we need to walk through the new door which God may be opening for us.

True, people do sometimes treat doubts as an excuse NOT to engage with God. But if our doubts are really about an honest yearning after truth, I believe that they can lead us to a fresh, deeper encounter with Christ –

because he is the truth. We should never lose sight of the fact that the Christian faith is not first and foremost about believing certain things of God, but about learning to trust in God. Doubts about faith can sometimes throw us onto greater dependence on God Himself.

In these difficult times, we should not be surprised or shocked if our faith is tested. Doubts may well appear. But if instead of trying to hide from them, we offer them to God in honesty; if we remember that we are not alone in this journey, but part of a community of faith; if we treat those doubts as an invitation to discover that God is bigger than we have yet understood; then we may find in those very doubts a door to growth in faith.

For Thomas, his doubts led him to be the first of all the disciples to understand and confess the true meaning of Jesus' resurrection: "My Lord and my God!" Perhaps for us, too, in the weeks ahead doubts honestly offered to God may become the gateway to a fresh and deeper encounter with the Risen Christ.



So, rather than feeling sorry for Thomas, I find myself today feeling rather grateful to him.

Sonnet for St Thomas the Apostle, by Malcolm Guite

'We do not know ... how can we know the way?'
Courageous master of the awkward question,
You spoke the words the others dared not say
And cut through their evasion and abstraction.
O doubting Thomas, father of my faith,
You put your finger on the nub of things:
We cannot love some disembodied wraith,
But flesh and blood must be our king of kings.
Your teaching is to touch, embrace, anoint,
Feel after him and find him in the flesh.

Because he loved your awkward counterpoint,
The Word has heard and granted you your wish.
O place my hands with yours, help me divine
The wounded God whose wounds are healing mine.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....

[Spend a few moments in quiet, reflecting on what you have heard or read.]

PRAYERS

Although we cannot meet under the same roof, God has joined us together by His Spirit, and so we pray.

We bring to you, Lord
The Church in all its richness and all its need;
All its diversity and all its division.
Give us a fresh understanding of what it means to live in you;
May all of us – laity and clergy together –
Celebrate the reality of your presence among us,
Filling us with new life and new hope.

Lord in your presence:

We lift our hearts to you.

We bring to you, Lord
Our neighbourhoods, our nation, our world;
All the areas that are fastened shut to hold you out;
All the bewildered confusion about who we are and why we are here;
All the doubts and insecurity,
And all the searching for inner peace.

Lord in your presence:

We lift our hearts to you.

We bring to you, Lord
Our homes and families,
And all the joys and sorrows of these times.
We bring the rooms in which we eat and work and relax;
And invite you in to them all.

Lord in your presence:

We lift our hearts to you.

We bring to you, Lord
Those who feel hurt by life,
And all who find it difficult to trust in you;
We bring you those who need refreshment and hope,
Comfort, healing and inner serenity.

Lord in your presence:

We lift our hearts to you.

We bring to you, Lord
Those who approach death with great fear
And those who die unprepared to meet you.
Have mercy on us all,
Forgive us all that is past
And gather us into your everlasting kingdom of peace and joy.

Lord in your presence:

We lift our hearts to you.

We bring to you, Lord
The love of our hearts
As we recall the extent of your love for us
Which understands our frailty
And reaches out to us where we are.

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Take a few moments to remember before God those who are struggling with illness – those known to you, and those you do not know.

*And offer to God's loving mercy all who have died – including **John Smith, Aputhamalar Sanmuganathan, David Robinson, Peter Manning, Michael Turvey, and Bill Wood** – and those whose anniversaries fall at this time – including **Emily Jones, Brian Purvis, Barbara Irvine, Jim and John Hellicar, David Phillips, Tom Roberts, Mike Niccolls, Irene Everett-Perkins, Eric Orton, Felix Alexander, and Joan Kendall.***

The Lord's Prayer (use this version, or the traditional words if you prefer)

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.

Amen.

ENDING

Loving God,
May our minds be full of your voice,
Our hearts full of your love,
And our thoughts full of your grace.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
Be with us all evermore. **Amen.**

