

Greenway's Benefice Weekly Reflection (No. 7)

Sunday 3rd May 2020

Bible Reading - John 20:19-31

As you read this Reflection today, I suspect many of us are living in "self-isolation" – or at least practicing "social distancing" – in order to minimise any possibility of being touched by the current COVID-19 epidemic. It's a challenging time for us all, but something we're going to have to accept and work through.

Our Bible reading today begins with the disciples of Jesus locking themselves away from the dangers that lurked outside – we could call it self-isolation, first century style! Following the death of Jesus, they were distraught, confused, and in fear of their lives from the threats of the Jewish and Roman authorities of the day. But there in their isolation Jesus appears to them, restoring their joy and confidence, as they realise he truly is alive! It's a reminder to us that we can know the presence and peace of Jesus with us even at life's darkest times.

But one of their number is missing – Thomas! Maybe he had slipped out furtively to get some much needed provisions – we don't know. But whatever his reason, he missed out on that crucial moment, and is not convinced by the others' account of their meeting with Jesus. He bluntly states his disbelief, and demands physical proof before he will believe.

There is a strange dichotomy between faith and proof. In the Epistle to Hebrews, the writer says, *Faith means being sure of the things we hope for, and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it. (Hebrews 11:1, NCV)*. Real faith in God is not "wishful thinking" - it is, in a sense, the "key" that opens up a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

Recently, a member of the public responded to a post on the Facebook page of a Christian organisation, saying of the current Coronavirus crisis, *"What's happening proves there is no God."*

As we reflect on the current worldwide pandemic, and all the associated suffering and loss, I guess there are many people who have had similar thoughts, or at least asked the question, *"If there is a God, why doesn't He do something about it?"* – in a similar way to what people were saying almost 20 years ago, *"Where was God on September 11th?"*

The danger in this line of thinking is that it can undermine our understanding of the very nature of God – at least, the God who reveals Himself in the Bible, and supremely in Jesus Christ. God may not take the storm away – but he has promised to be with us *IN* the storm if we trust Him.

God grieves when he sees his children and his creation suffering, but he is not some kind of celestial Santa Claus who ensures his children only have "nice" things. Neither is he a supreme autocrat, exercising totalitarian control over his creation.

Jesus made it very clear in his teaching that "bad" things that happen are not a case of God showing vengeance or lack of concern, but the outworking of the "natural" laws of cause and effect under which all creation functions, sadly distorted and maligned by human intervention. (Although God can at times use these events to speak to us and challenge us).

As Jesus appeared a week later and spoke directly to Thomas (John 20:26-29), it's interesting that Thomas didn't need proof to satisfy his faith, in the way he had rashly demanded a week earlier. Simply meeting with Jesus in that locked room was enough to sweep away his doubts and fears, and elicit that response "*My Lord and my God!*"

Faith suddenly became personal for him – because knowing Jesus is what it's all about! And when we know Jesus is alive, He can turn fear into peace, despair into joy, and doubt into hope.

We may say "It was OK for Thomas – he actually SAW Jesus – we don't have that opportunity!" But notice that in verse 29 Jesus said, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

Jesus reminds us that real faith, and subsequently God's blessing, is found through putting our trust in Him, even though at times we can't see the answers.

Those disciples had already been told Jesus was alive – but until they met Him personally they weren't convinced! And there are many people like that – they may have been told Jesus is alive, they may even believe it in their minds – but have never really met Him!

Because God has given us his Holy Spirit, we can know Jesus with us even though we can't see Him! As Jesus said to Thomas, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" May we, like Thomas, respond to Jesus, and say "My Lord and My God!" And as we do, we can take to heart those words of Jesus – "Peace be with you".

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Can I commend to you the words of an old hymn we sang in Church the day before the "lock-down" was announced, which I found very powerful and relevant. I hope you will too!

In heavenly love abiding, No change my heart shall fear; And safe is such confiding, For nothing changes here: The storm may roar without me, My heart may low be laid; But God is round about me, And can I be dismayed?	Wherever He may guide me, No want shall turn me back; My Shepherd is beside me, And nothing can I lack: His wisdom ever waketh, His sight is never dim; He knows the way He taketh, And I will walk with Him.	Green pastures are before me, Which yet I have not seen; Bright skies will soon be o'er me, Where darkest clouds have been; My hope I cannot measure, My path to life is free; My Saviour has my treasure, And He will walk with me.
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Anna L. Waring.

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Let's share together this prayer as we remember both our own needs and the needs of the world around us...

Loving Lord, in all the darkness and uncertainty of our present world, we thank you for the promise of the presence of Jesus with all those who trust in Him.

In these times of stress, anxiety and uncertainty, may our leaders be given your wisdom and guidance, and may many people respond to the call of Jesus and discover in Him new peace for today and new hope for the future.

Jesus, my Lord and my God, may your comfort and peace fill me afresh, and banish all shadows and fear in the light of your presence.

And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds, through Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.