

**Worcester Cathedral – 16 April 2023,
2nd Sunday of Easter – Eucharist 10.30 pm**

Readings: Acts 2. 14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1. 3-9; John 20. 19-31

- If you have worshipped at the Cathedral for more than 10 years you may have heard me preach about Thomas and know that he is my kind of man!
- He doesn't believe just on hearsay that Jesus is alive.
- He realised that there were great pressures on the disciples to recoup something from the disaster of the crucifixion. They could be imagining that they saw Jesus alive, and of course at the time all who reported the sightings of Jesus were in a highly emotional state.
- Thomas insists, I want to see the evidence, I want to see and feel the marks of the nails, otherwise I will not believe.
- I am an experimental scientist, preconditioned to doubt, to asking how and why. I have to see real solid evidence before I will accept a reported observation or a suggested theory.
- Before I retired sometimes my research students would say, 'I believe that this is how it is, or should be', I am afraid I was rather intolerant of such statements and would say I don't want belief, I want evidence.
- The scientific method involves making observations about a phenomenon, and in the light of the data, proposing a hypothesis as to the reason for the observations, designing an experiment to test the hypothesis.
- If the resulting observations support the hypothesis, it might be elevated to the level of a theory, but even then, if subsequent observations cast doubt on the validity of the theory, we have to go back, start again and make a new hypothesis and design new experiments to test it.
- This is why true scientists are rarely black and white in their statements. Even when there is good evidence to back what they think is true, there is always the possibility that they have not thought of all the parameters involved and things may not be as they appear.
- Belief and doubt are always present, they are held in balance, and this approach has been enormously successful in helping us to understand our world and in developing astounding technologies.
- So you see, I will defend Thomas to the hilt.
- However, when Thomas meets Jesus face to face, he doesn't need to indulge in detailed data collection. 'My Lord and my God,' not just physically alive Jesus, but the risen Christ. He knew he was in the presence of the very God who created all things. (the Greek word used was the version of God's unutterable name YHWH).
- Having doubted deeply, he comes to a profoundly new knowledge of God in Christ.
- There are many Christians who suggest that doubt and questioning displays a lack of faith and is downright wrong. God has revealed all we need to know in the scriptures, and we just have to accept it.
- I want to suggest to you that true belief incorporates doubt, and that as for Thomas, doubt can lead to deeper belief and a deeper understanding of our faith and our God.
- The other disciples had told him that Jesus was bodily alive, but Thomas met and experienced the risen Christ. We don't read of Thomas in the NT again, but there is a tradition that he went to India

to share his experience of the risen Christ, and there are Christian churches in the Near East and in India who firmly trace their origins to his witness.

- When one thinks of the faith and commitment required in those days to travel such distances to unknown societies, clearly Thomas' experience of the risen Christ was profoundly transformative.
- The account we heard of Peter speaking with great courage and authority at Pentecost demonstrates the transformative effect of the resurrection on the other disciples.
- The experience of the risen Christ changed their whole experience and view of life.
- Do we believe and experience the risen Christ in the way Thomas did?
- What convinces you that all we celebrated last weekend is true?
- The death and resurrection of Jesus is crucial to the Christian faith. But there are Christians who do not believe in the resurrection. They say the physical process of death cannot be reversed. That is true, but I would argue along with the apostle Paul that resurrection is actually built into the very fabric of the universe God has created.
- Paul had never met the historical Jesus before he encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus road. However, there were sceptics amongst the Church in Corinth.
- Paul explained in great detail in his letter to them why the resurrection is not so surprising. (perhaps homework - 1 Corinthians 15?)
- If we look around at our world, we can see that God has built change and transformation into all around us.
- Think about water. The simple molecule H_2O is experienced most of the time as liquid - to drink, to swim in, to float on, essential in our bodies to keep us functioning. It exists as water because each molecule of H_2O attaches itself to others by a weak force called the hydrogen bond. The force is weak enough that the molecules can still exchange with neighbours to allow water to flow.
- If the temperature drops below 0 C it starts to transform to solid ice because at the lower temperature the force is strong enough to stop the molecules moving.
- But if the temperature of the water rises above zero, increasingly some of the molecules get excited and escape into the atmosphere and we get water vapour.
- Above 100 C the molecules are too active to attach to one another and we get steam. One could say ice dies above 0C and water dies above 100C.
- I love fluffy clouds, all those water molecules held loosely by hydrogen bonds - wonderful! I am a daft scientist!
- When the air cools they transform to water and rain descends.
- You know our planet has the same number of water molecules now as it did when it was formed about 2 billion years ago. In all that time the molecules have been transforming between vapour, water and ice.
- All the elements on earth have been moving around too. Animal death fertilises the ground, makes room for new creatures. The atoms in my body may have existed in a dinosaur millions of years ago.
- Evolution that brought life to our planet and continues today, entails life, death and new life as one life form develops into another.
- So modern science tells us what we term 'death' is not the end of life it is just a transition to another physical or life state.

- Paul understood this and also argues that resurrection is all around us. He chose the example of a seed. It has to fall into the ground and die for a new plant or tree to grow.
- What is significant is that the new life is very different from the life that died.
- Thomas realised that Jesus had changed, this was not the Jesus that had walked with the disciples, this was the risen Christ.
- For Paul too, the one he met on the Damascus road was obviously not a resuscitated physical body.
- So can we understand the change?
- In discussing the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues that there is more to the universe than the physical. He suggests that there is a natural body which is transformed into a spiritual body through death.
- Modern science is perhaps beginning to catch up on this in its acknowledgement that in addition to the physical, **consciousness** is a vital if mysterious ingredient of life.
- It has come to its fullest manifestation on earth in human beings - in their appreciation of beauty, their ability to love, their awareness of otherness and transcendence, their seeking after knowledge and meaning, and their inventiveness. All capabilities that cannot be explained by physics and biochemistry.
- Science is trying to understand how the functioning of the brain and body is related to our experience of consciousness. It still has a long way to go.
- I think with Teilhard de Chardin, that all created matter, plants and creatures have a level of consciousness that evolves with the physical, and has evolved to the highest level so far in humans.
- As with the physical, God is the source of all consciousness, and as conscious beings we are being drawn to him to increasingly to reflect God's image, perhaps that is what meant by being included in Christ's resurrection?
- As for Thomas and Paul, we now know that we live in the very presence of Christ in all our lives, so whether we are physically alive or dead, as conscious beings we live and move in the consciousness of God.
- Isn't that absolutely mind-blowing? I walk with God and God walks with all of creation.
- However, as must have been the case throughout all the centuries since Jesus walked the earth, if this is all true, people have wondered why all the suffering, why all the cruelty, why all the wars and why human stupidity damaging our planet.
- I have to admit that it is in the light of all of this that I from time to time I really do begin to doubt - why is it like this?
- But maybe I need to remember that put in the context of the billions of years of earth, animal, and even humanoid evolution, this time of human induced chaos is no time.
- God is working his purpose out, we live in him and Jesus in his incarnation showed that God understands and participates in the joy and suffering that evolution involves.
- Perhaps we have to be clear that when God creates, it is the end product that is very good. If things don't seem very good to us, and humans seem very far from the image of God now, it shows the creation work was not completed in the first chapters of Genesis, it is still in process.

- History is moving towards the new heaven and new earth described in Revelation 21. Right from the beginning this was God's focus, and God made sure all the necessary components - material and spiritual were present in the beginning.
- We can see many of them now, the absolute wonder of the natural world as shown by the apostle of nature - David Attenborough.
- So when I doubt, I look around at the animals, birds, insects, trees and the clouds that speak to me of God in his resurrection love and power.
- For me a very memorable meeting with God was sitting quietly with Linda and our friend in a cove on the north west coast of Scotland, when a seal poked its head above water and just looked at us for several minutes. That was an event that unified the physical and conscious and gave me a small vision of the new earth!
- In the end resurrection all around us assures us that God's good purposes will be fulfilled, and as Julian of Norwich said all will be well.
- Amen

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