

Reflection for Sunday 11th April 2021

Will we be part of the Kingdom normal?

Easter is behind us now, isn't it? The time of Lent led up to that day, we took time to meditate, pray, think about things, be challenged, ask questions, find answers (sometimes); so, what happens now? Is it that we gradually fall back into the routine we had before? Well, that is what it seems to be sometimes. But what about now? Not only has Easter been part of life, so is Covid, and with restrictions slowly being eased, is it time to 'go back to normal'?

What do you think? To me this is a crucial question, and one we cannot escape from.

Last Sunday's Reflection centred on the early hours of Resurrection day, today we centre on the later developments of that same day, the human reaction to God's action, and to the emerging community born early on. What impact does the Resurrection have on people who are very similar to us?

I would hope that the way forward is different from what led into this; with changes that will contribute to building up a better sense of belonging, where solidarity, caring, empathy, commitment to *shalom* (which is the Hebrew word for peace, but a deep-rooted peace which is based "on mutually supportive relationships with each other and with God") become the normal, where part of our normal is to reject what diminishes life for all people, where our normal is what rejects evil; for this to happen we have to become people of the Resurrection, Let us then begin by being challenged by the readings this week.

Let us turn to the book of **Acts chapter 4, verses 32-35**. A really good place to begin. It tells us the community of believers who tried to organize life after the Resurrection. After reading this short passage, do you think it is a good idea? Sharing what they had, for the sake of a better world, for peace, for harmony? Would we be up to this if it meant that nobody would be in need? Does the fact that this is a Biblical way forward, offer us hope or fill us with dread? It is a reminder that our faith has important things to say to the current political, economic and social world.

Having thought of that, now think of all the arguments you can against that idea, and how those ideas would contribute to a better world for all people, leading to what we read in Deuteronomy 15:4 "*there will be no one in need among you*": this verse is part of the implementation of the Sabbath Year, when every seventh year is the year of remission of debts for all, the land will not be sown or harvested, and slaves will be freed... A new beginning based on caring for each other. It is challenging. Of course it is; it wasn't perfect, as you can see if you continue reading Acts into chapter 5, but there are some seeds of hope in this short reading. In the same way as we call out what goes wrong, we should give what is right a chance to flourish.

I invite you now to turn to the **Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31**. This is the closing scene of the Gospel. Later on the day of the Resurrection and the following week, so it is the narrative of the first reactions of the group of followers of Jesus. The first hours for these disciples are rooted in the death experience as we find them behind locked doors living in fear. *And it is to that reality* that Jesus stands among them, seeing them as they are; Jesus words offer Peace. Quite different from what they were feeling. And we also discover that the Resurrected bears the marks of the cross – his wounds are still there to be seen and touched.

Back in July 1983 while up in Edinburgh, one day, visiting the Botanical Gardens, which were also home to the Modern Art Gallery, I came across a sculpture by Jacob Epstein called "The Risen Christ".

Still today it has great impact: Jesus points to the wound in his hand. Risen he may be, but also wounded. And those wounds will not disappear, they will be a reminder of the cross, and why Jesus was condemned to this – because he showed us the new way of life that God wanted for all God’s children.



Jesus’ first words -**Peace to you**, take us back to *shalom*, as we saw above. Jesus is offering even Thomas, who doubts the Resurrection, that *shalom*. It is not reserved for only a few, but it is an offering for all.

Jesus is saying that God’s power is not, and will not be silenced, or can ever be killed.

God’s power is ever present.

Thomas reminds us that we may take some time to recognize the Resurrection, but that does not mean God is not alive among us.

Peace to you is the message which will develop the new way forward.

And in the Gospel of John, this is when Jesus blows the Spirit over the disciples. That which in the book of Acts happens on Pentecost and is what directs the people to the new hope, transforming life as we saw just above when considering the passage from Acts.

The new reality that we receive in the Resurrection is really challenging. I don’t think Easter has finished; in a way I believe it has just begun. It is the challenge set out to each of us, here and now, to be that community of believers that will involve all and everything: who we are, what have, what we hope for, what we believe... into the life ahead. Based on mutual forgiveness, on a sense of mutual accountability, of sharing, on building that new reality where the needs of others are cared for, where war and destruction, and discrimination, and betrayal, and greed, and racism, and injustice... all are confronted by the message of *Shalom*.

This *Shalom* is what the early church tried hard to establish, that has not always turned out as we need it to, does not absolve us from still trying to work on it. The mutual recognition which brings harmony, unity, peace, understanding, forgiveness, and respect...this is where we can be in the way ahead, and our worship, or life, our prayers, our dreams must be nurtured by this vision: This is the only way that there will be a new normal, a better normal, a Kingdom normal.

The way forward is not easy, but if we allow that Peace which Jesus gives us to transform us, we will be able to get involved in the new way that lies ahead. We must do this together. Amen.

Collect for this Sunday:

Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, you break through locks of gated communities and hardened hearts: accept our doubts, heal our desire for certainty and, by your Spirit’s gentle touch, make us people forgiven and forgiving; through Jesus Christ, the Giver of Peace. Amen.

(Prayers for an Inclusive Church)