

Sermon for Easter 2 – St James, Cambridge – 7.4.13
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Lectionary Texts: Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

“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.” (John 20:30-31)

What a set of readings! After celebrating Easter through Mary’s encounter with the risen Jesus in the garden last week, today we’re taken further into the resurrection through Peter and Thomas:

Two more people whose lives are utterly transformed through meeting the risen Christ. As we were reminded so painfully in the Passion readings during Holy Week, poor Peter (who often gives voice to what’s going on for all the disciples and struggled so hard with Jesus having to go the way of the cross) is the one disciple singled out for denying that he was a follower of Jesus.

I have a friend who says that of all the characters in the Bible (apart from Jesus), King David and Peter are his favourites: “Because when I love God, I’m on fire - like King David - but then (when I don’t) I’m like Peter: I’m the first one to sell him out.” And I’m sure we can all identify with those parts in ourselves.

Yet in today’s reading from Acts, far from fearing what it might cost him to stand up for his relationship with Jesus, Peter is now risking *everything*.

His ministry has already begun to arouse a lot of public interest and therefore considerable hostility from the same authorities who’ve been culpable in Jesus’ death. There’s already been trouble: Peter and others have been arrested and put in prison, but then miraculously ‘delivered’, so they can carry on preaching and healing.

The authorities are beginning to panic that they can’t shut them up and so bring them before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) under charges of insubordination and slander, who say:

We gave you strict orders *not* to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' (Acts 5:28)

And far from being put off, Peter and the others make the most of the opportunity to deliver their message, insisting that God's authority is over and above that of any human group and affirm once again that the Jesus whom they'd tried to put and end to has been raised from the dead and is alive.

What an amazing change in Peter! But it's not in his own strength....

The gospel reading is John's version of Pentecost and the out pouring of the Holy Spirit: Jesus comes through locked doors to appear to the disciples and says:

'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.'** (John 20:19-22)

Then John goes straight on to tell of another person who is transformed through meeting the risen Jesus - 'doubting' Thomas, who's refused to believe what the other disciples had seen. But Jesus appears again, inviting Thomas to do what he needs in order to believe it's him, and Thomas suddenly bursts out **"My Lord and my God!"** He's the first person to affirm the divinity of Jesus.

The poet Denise Levertov imagines Thomas' version of things in her poem 'Thomas Didymus' (I'm just reading the second half of it):

"...And after the empty tomb
when they told me that He lived, had spoken to Magdalene,
told me
that though He had passed through the door like a ghost
He had breathed on them
the breath of a living man -
even then
when hope tried with a flutter of wings
to lift me -
still, alone with myself,
my heavy cry was the same: Lord
I believe,
help thou mine unbelief.

I needed

blood to tell me the truth,
 the touch
 of blood. Even
 my sight of the dark crust of it
 round the nail holes
 didn't thrust its meaning all the way through
 to that manifold knot in me
 that willed to possess all knowledge,
 refusing to loosen
 unless that insistence won
 the battle I fought with life

But when my hand
 led by His hand's firm clasp
 entered the unhealed wound,
 my fingers encountering
 rib-bone and pulsing heat,
 what I felt was not
 scalding pain, shame for my
 obstinate need,
 but light, light streaming
 into me, over me, filling the room
 as I had lived till then
 in a cold cave, and now
 coming forth for the first time,
 the knot that bound me unravelling,
 I witnessed
 all things quicken to colour, to form,
 my question
 not answered but given
 its part
 in a vast unfolding design lit
 by a risen sun.

The Greek word for Jesus breathing on them – filling them with his Spirit - is enphusesen - the same as the one in Genesis, when God forms man out of the dust of the earth **‘and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being...’ (Genesis 2:7)**

And the word for ‘man’ is anthropos, which, although it happens to be in the masculine form, means a full human being (whether male *or* female).

That's what God's breath in us is about: becoming more and more fully all he has created us to be: "...**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.**" (John 20:31)

It's what the book of Revelation is all about, too: making known to us the *person* of Jesus Christ: the one "who loves us and has freed us... and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father." Getting to know Jesus is what unveils what it's all about.

The Spirit of God is poured out again and again ... through Jesus' conception and being born as one of us; through his baptism, and now through his death and resurrection. Far from being 'quenched' (as some in the times of the Old Testament believed had happened with the end of the prophets), God's Spirit is poured out afresh and even more abundantly so that we might know more and more of his life and power in and among us.

In the person of Jesus, the fulfilment of the eschaton has begun: the whole of history has been redefined by the One who is, and who was, and who is to come.... And our job is to be open to *receiving* it as fully as we can... to discover life as we've never *known* it before - to be swept up into a life and energy that is fulfilling and exhilarating beyond our imagining.... Just like Peter and Thomas.

As someone I know puts it: "Our minds are always a step behind the reality of who Jesus is: they always have some catching up to do. The Holy Spirit is the One who activates this 'catching up' in us – helping to bridge the gap - so that we can walk into the fullness of who He is..."

We'll always have a longing to belong until we meet Christ. Christ is the *only* One who can fulfil the yearning in each of us to belong – our 'restless hearts'. I never had a sense of belonging until I met Jesus. Then I suddenly knew the most radical *be – longing*."

The marks of this amazing new life (according to just today's readings, let alone any others) are: belonging, peace, joy, purpose, meaning, reconciliation, trust, fulfilment and the recognition of God's authority over *everything* else.

Just over a year ago, I was lucky enough to spend some time doing a series of seminars and bible studies with some of the inmates in Louisiana State Penitentiary.

It's a harsh environment – renowned for being one of the most punitive systems in the USA. In the group of twelve we met with, most of them had life sentences

(which in Louisiana, *means* life – many of them had 200-year sentences – with 84 men on Death Row and a State governor who prides himself on never granting pardon or parole). Three of the men in our little group have now been there for 40 years.

It's built on a former slave plantation (the size of Manhattan, with 5,000 prisoners) and is known as 'Angola' because some of the slaves on the original plantation came from Angola, Africa and I wasn't sure anything had really changed.

We were invited to teach and talk about God – the idea had originally grown out of a conversation about some of the parallels between prisons and religious life and whether a 'prison' cell or space might somehow be transformed through conceiving of it as a 'monastic' cell/ space.

It was a profound time and there are many, many stories to tell.

We learned from 'the inside' of some of the subtly hidden forms of corruption, degradation and violence built carefully into the system. The motto amongst the inmates is "Hurry up and wait:" because they are regularly and randomly interrupted by the guards and made to wait in line... until suddenly (and just as randomly) they're allowed to return to whatever they were in the middle of again. It's a humiliation tactic.

Not that these men didn't feel that they deserved to be there: every one of the group, apart from one -who has protested his innocence from the beginning (and who knows, he may well be)- acknowledged that they had each done something terrible and deserved to be punished for it. But they had also each taken full responsibility for what they had done and were trapped in a system where, whatever they did (and most of them were *full* of regret and remorse at the damage they had done and the shame they had inflicted on their families), they were never going to be allowed to forget it – or to know the relief of forgiveness or compassion. As one of them put it, "We aren't able to 'right' everything we want or need to right, because we're prisoners: we're not given the chance."

But what they wanted to talk about *far* more than any of these things was *God* – and the ways in which they had come to know God in totally new and amazing ways.

One evening, a few of us met in an upper room - firmly behind locked doors.

We read exactly the gospel passage we've heard today, Lectio-Divina style and the depth of sharing afterwards was remarkable.

One person- (I'll call him Terry) who'd seemed terribly burdened and downcast in previous meetings – was suddenly filled with a new sense of energy and life. He told us how something amazing had happened whilst meditating on the passage together: "I've always felt I was wrong to have so many questions... But now I've realised it's all right: it's all right to be a doubting Thomas..." And a few moments later, with a big smile: "Whoever would have thought we were sitting in a *prison* at this moment..."

Another said: "I *don't* have a life sentence. I've been recommended for parole every two years – eight times- and eight times its been denied: to the point where I cursed God and cried 'Why *not me?*' And I made all sorts of attempts to escape reality – drugs, physical, mental.... Yet 'the Hound of Heaven' was after me. I still don't know why I can't get out. For along time it made me feel a failure... but finally I got to the place where I said to God 'I'll try to find out what your purpose is for me whether I stay *or* go.... And since then I've been pretty happy. I don't really care any more whether I get out or not (others do – like my son – they don't want to hear me say that). I'm ready for whatever: whatever comes, whatever goes...."

When he'd finished speaking, another member of the group promptly responded "If only that judge could see you *now!*"

We came back *changed* by the testimonies of those men: that's the power of the living Word among us. The risen Christ came and stood among us in completely unexpected and incredibly powerful ways: I long for the day when we can return.

I wonder what those moments of encounter and unexpected life have been about for you? And I wonder what they might be about for us and for this community? So as we prepare to celebrate Communion together, let us open ourselves to receiving more of the fullness of Jesus' breath and Spirit in us, as we join our voices with Peter and Thomas through the words of the Psalm: **'Praise the Lord! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!'** Amen.

Readings:

Acts 5:27-32

27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.’ ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.’

Psalm 150

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

² Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³ Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

Revelation 1:4-8

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;
 every eye will see him,
 even those who pierced him;
 and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
 So it is to be. Amen.

⁸ 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ 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.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ 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.'

²⁶ 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.'²⁷ 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.'²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'²⁹ 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.'

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ 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.