

'The risen Christ's gifts for his church'

Sermon message for Easter 1 2021 All Saints Belmont by the Rev Derek Lightbourne

Late on Sunday evening it was, 'and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, for fear of the Jewish authorities.' It seems to me the events of Jesus' rising are so alive and real! The disciples told it how they experienced it. Even to the point of being incredulous. Mary in the garden thought he was the gardener. The women Mark relates, 'went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified.' The men disciples were gathered in the Upper Room and Luke relates 'suddenly the Lord himself stood among them...They were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost.'...

Before this for the disciples there must have been a sense of failure as to what had happened. All their hopes were dashed, and as well they had failed Christ, having run off when Jesus arrested and then crucified. Peter had denied knowing his Lord and master. Judas, earlier appointed as one of the 12 had betrayed Jesus into the hands of the authorities. That's the scenario portrayed by the gospel writers.

Then the absolute surprise - 'suddenly'..... the writers relate, 'Jesus came and stood among them.. 'breaking in upon their disillusion and despair.... Showing his wounded hands and side, still marked by the events of the passion. Can you believe it? Thomas had to wait a week and Jesus came to him, putting doubts to rest. Their conversation sums up the situation: 'Stop your doubting, and believe.' And the response: 'My Lord and my God.'

I've entitled this Sermon: '*The gifts of the risen Christ for his church.*' This morning's gospel is an account of the disciples receiving these gifts. Furthermore, may I suggest they are key components for Jesus' followers today. What we are on about in the church, and for society needs in today's context.

- 1) First, *peace*. When Jesus came among the disciples his first bidding was of peace. Twice, he emphasised. We live in an uncertain world. Thankfully, we have peace among nations, mostly. Jesus was more emphasising that inner peace. And with the proximity of Covid it brings an uncertainty of coming in community and spreading beyond national borders. It seems the pandemic doesn't discriminate, as it is rife in the USA, and Africa and South America and Europe. Certainly, being a small nation and distant from populous areas keeps us safer. How might we respond? That's where we need to support medical expertise as they work on find ways to limit and indeed eliminate such devastating effects. Thus, to pray for those in the medical field, and border workers. I was recently reading a University of Otago periodical and it was surprising to read how many are working to lessen the effects of Covid. We've become used to the field of epidemiology. As well there's a chair of international health, an infectious disease emergency planning group, an evolutionary biologist group, a chair of viral pathogenesis, structural biology and medicinal chemistry seeking to develop anti-viral medicine. And others working in the areas of psychology, measuring the social effects of the pandemic. Thus, being aware of people's fears. It's like the university has pooled its resources and experience to combat this threat to humanity. Hence, we need to pray for the peace that can dwell in and between people. As we support one another we can allay people's fears.
- 2) The second gift mentioned is of the *Holy Spirit*. Jesus had a message for the disciples - they have a task to engage in: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' We'll come to that. But first they need to receive the empowering. When he appeared Jesus 'breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' There's an important aspect here, in a point made in Archbishop Temple's Commentary on

John. The correct translation of the Greek is 'Receive Holy Spirit.' That is, it's not the divine person which is bestowed but the power and energy of which the Holy Spirit of God is the Source. Earlier in the gospel story it had been noted it was not given to the disciples as Jesus hadn't been glorified. Now through the cross and resurrection came the divine energy active in and through people. Earlier Jesus had described the working of Holy Spirit as Paraclete, as one who comes alongside to help. Comforter, Advocate, Guide, and Encourager. The event of Pentecost marked the outpouring of Holy Spirit to activate and enliven the fledgling Christian community, the *koinonia* or fellowship of disciples. The church today needs Holy Spirit to guide, as we seek ways ahead to meet the needs of God's people. I'd describe it as that inner energy, that knowing, that equipping. It's that which provides the warmth of fellowship, and of belonging. And it's a 'sent' ministry – to bring hope to others, including 'the last the lost and the least.'

- 3) A third gift is the quality of *forgiveness*. This was a key consideration Jesus had earlier taught about, in human relationships, and towards and from God. And who knows it's a quality needed in today's world, and the wider society. Its basic to our prayer as well – as in 'The Lord's prayer' – forgive us our sins as we forgive others. The extent and depth of forgiveness though wasn't fully realised until the cross, with Jesus saying in the presence of the soldiers: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing'. So, it was as Jesus rose again and came among the disciples, forgiveness rated a mention: 'If you forgive people's sin, they are forgiven.' That symbolic action of Jesus toward Peter resounded of forgiveness when he had denied knowing Jesus in that tense time of the arrest. Jesus asked Peter three times, Do you love me? ,,,, Thus he had a special word for Peter in leadership of the discipleship community.

As we believe this and try to practice it in our relationships, I do commend the Absolution of the NZ Prayer Book: 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.' Inherent here is the divine one forgiving, and in relationship with others and towards ourselves. It has a sense of completeness. Forgiveness so helps in reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.

- 4) The fourth is the gift of the Christ himself – that is *belief in Jesus*. This comes at the conclusion of John's gospel as of all that Jesus did and stood for: 'That you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.' If I may paraphrase it, personally, it is that belief in Jesus that gives a perspective to how I seek to live my life. It's about living the 'abundant life' which Jesus earlier spoke of. St Paul expressed this well in writing to the church in Rome: 'Now that we have been put right with God, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. He has brought us by faith into this experience of God's grace, in which we now live.' (Rom 5.1 -2)

In *summing up*, the passage which is today's gospel is like a coda – an end-piece. Tracking back, the observance of the events of Holy Week bring us to be aware of the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry, of his suffering and death on a cross. That thankfully is not the end. Rather it is a climax with resurrection, and those appearances reminding us of the assuring words of the angel: 'Why do you look for the living among the dead. Jesus is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day to rise again.' (Lk 24)

