

Second Sunday of Easter Year B

We are now in the Easter Season, which continues until Pentecost.

Acts 4: 32-35

This reading presents a rosy picture of the early church. The Good News of Jesus' Resurrection has clearly had a profound impact on the whole community; many have become believers; and the quality of their life together seems to be exemplary – literally, a model for all to wonder at, and to follow.

A distinguished New Testament scholar of a few decades ago once wrote approximately thus: *what must the truth have been like, if these people wrote about it in this way*. In saying this he was suggesting that the words we read in our bibles might not necessarily bear quite the same relationship to truth as we might expect, for example, in a legal deposition, or even in factual news reporting. But something remarkable must have been going on to prompt the biblical writers to write as they did.

So, in this instance, what was going on? It is evident from a couple of chapters later in Acts that this uncanny level of peace and harmony did not last all that long. So perhaps it wasn't, in reality, quite as rosy as this chapter suggests. Playtime for cynics, we might say. But remember, given that Luke (the writer of Acts) is open enough to acknowledge that the wheels eventually came off this utopian project, we have to conclude that (as I said above) something remarkable must have been going on. Paul's later efforts to organise a collection for the poor of Jerusalem suggests that becoming a Christian didn't of itself instantly switch on all human inclinations to generosity; that had to be taught.

In our very different social setting we might not respond, either individually or communally, in the way those first Christians did. But surely we must ask ourselves questions such as: what differences does my being a Christian make? What difference does it make to me? What difference does it make for other people who have to live or work with me?

Ps 133

This psalm paints an interesting picture of Family harmony. The oil running down Aaron's head onto his beard is a reference to Exod 29:7. To us it presents a slightly messy image, but it signalled Aaron's divine "ordination" as a priest. Whatever the cultural context, ordination is immensely meaningful for those who receive it, and for those who witness it; it is a sign of unity.

The thrust of the psalm seems to be to emphasise the importance of harmony and peace within families. Typical of Hebrew poetry, this psalm employs repetition of words and ideas in order to highlight the point. Look (just to give one example from this psalm alone) at the words "running down". It's

almost as if we are watching raindrops run down windowpanes, the steady, cumulative drip-drip of blessing.

1 John 1:1 - 2:2

John the Elder (probably not John the Evangelist) is a revered Elder of the church in the area of Ephesus. His community has been riven by factionalism. Some folk have left the fellowship, leaving behind them incalculable pain. John's task, apparently in the face of a dismaying exhibition of un-love, is to try to ensure that his people put love once again at the heart of their understanding of discipleship.

He begins by affirming that the life of the community is rooted in personal direct experience of the risen Christ. The people of these churches are affirmed as being "in fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ". John reminds them that the faults may not all be on one side (v8), and enjoins them to honest confession of their own part in the disastrous community fracture that has happened. Yet in and through this painful heart-searching there is a reassurance of forgiveness (v9).

John talks in the final paragraph about his aims in writing to them "that (they) may not sin". His objective is the positive one: that in the midst of these painful experiences, the recriminations, the anger, there is the possibility that they might fall into sin – that is, they might take themselves into a place where they are hiding from God because they cannot cope with themselves. "We have an advocate with the Father", he says. Jesus Christ is rooting for you, loving you, however much you may feel otherwise.

John 20: 19-31

John's gospel does many things differently from the other gospels. The institution of the Lord's Supper is triggered by the feeding of the great crowd in chapter 6, rather than during the final conversation on the evening before the crucifixion. The call of the disciples by the lake takes place in the final chapter – chapter 21 – rather than at the very beginning of the story. Here in chapter 20, we find the gift of the Holy Spirit given directly and in person by Jesus, as the traumatized disciples gather in the Upper Room.

Thomas is often characterized as "doubting Thomas". So he may be – at the beginning of this episode. But at the end he has leapfrogged over the other disciples in his journey of faith. It is very interesting to trace the way in which various of the disciples come to faith over the post-resurrection period. Thomas's response to Jesus invitation to "put your finger here" etc., is to say "My Lord and my God!" Has any other disciple gone quite so far before? It is well worth a little in-depth bible study of your own as you pursue that question.

Many scholars believe (in the light of the closing verses of chapter 20) that John's gospel appeared in two editions; chapter 21, they suspect, was an addition in the second edition. That is an interesting idea with good support.

But whether we agree or not, the final words of chapter 20 underscore the evangelist's single-minded purpose in writing the gospel: that through believing you may have life in his name. For John, getting your head round the identity of Jesus as the Son of God is absolutely central to the journey of faith. We may fret over the literal meaning of the word "Son" in such an assertion, but John's point is that Jesus speaks and acts with God's authority and power. Believing is not just a matter of agreeing with a bizarre proposition, but rather of placing one's whole trust in Jesus as God's agent.

This Gospel is appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter in all three years of the cycle. In the context of this year's readings, which seem to point up the idea of ultimate hope, this Gospel takes on a fresh significance; it resonates with the other lections for the day in a different way from its performance in Years A and C. Today's lections suggest the fragility of human enterprise, building a sharing community, building a family, building a united church. They can all fall apart in a bitterly painful way. But that doesn't deny the supreme importance of holding onto the "hope of glory" that is built into every new venture of this kind, even after a previous attempt has failed.

Thomas felt left out of things. Just let your imagination work with that for a while. Yet it was he who first broke through the barrier and recognised the true importance of the resurrection.