

Third Sunday of Easter Year B

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

Acts 3: 12-19

Peter is responding here to an outbreak of public astonishment because he and his fellow apostle John have just healed a lame man in the name of Jesus. On the face of it, this passage represents Peter as using this opportunity to remind his audience that they were responsible for the death of Jesus, the servant of God. Jesus is referred to as 'servant', 'the Holy and Righteous One', and 'the Author of Life'. God raised him from the dead and it was through his name that this man has been given life and perfect health. They (the Israelites and their rulers) acted out of ignorance, but their responsibility remains.

Presumably 'your sins' (v18) refers to precisely their complicity in the death of Jesus. What role, we may well ask, did these particular Israelites play in the death of Jesus? What do we mean by 'our sins'? In our culture guilt is very much an individual matter – though in discussion around recent cases of industrial accidents the concept of corporate responsibility has been raised.

It seems clear that Peter is inviting his audience to take a broader view of guilt, in line with their own tradition.

This is a matter that we would do well to ponder. In respect of collateral damage in war zones, in which innocent civilians were killed; in respect of colonial rule which was certainly on occasions high-handed and harmful to the indigenous population; in respect of a financial system that expected returns to rise without limit – in all these matters and many more the question arises: how far can we insulate ourselves from blame for what has happened?

Ps 4

This psalm might be a commentary on our times. Look at verse 2, which speaks of '(loving) vain things and seeking after falsehood?'. Look too at verses 4 and 5 with their injunction to quiet reflection, acknowledgement of the transcendent God (in the offering of sacrifices, verse 5).

The sense of contentment rooted in a faithful relationship to God marks verses 7 and 8. Clearly implied is the fragility and emptiness of a life based on anything else.

1 John 3: 1-7

The writer of these letters (possibly John the Elder and not John the Evangelist, but it hardly matters) is wrestling with a profound problem. His church community has been torn apart by a dispute about theology – a problem not unknown in our own times. John wants to reassure the group who have remained faithful that they are children of God now (verse 2), but their future destiny is hidden. This much can be said, however: *when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*

John then embarks on a practical definition of sin, and the believers' relationship to it. These verse are the text for one of John Wesley's most controversial sermons and his doctrine of Christian Perfection. Without going into a very extended argument we can note this much: there is a link between sin and our relationship with God. When John claims *no one who abides in him sins*, is he arguing that it is impossible for one who abides in God to sin; or is he claiming that it is especially reprehensible if one who claims to abide in him is at the same time an active sinner; or is it a definition of what it means to abide in God that such a person does not sin? There is certainly support for the last of these in the next clause; *no-one who sins has either seen him or known him*.

The final sentence of verse 7 is clearly reassuring. It might suggest that the dispute that has proved so divisive was one in which each side was accusing the other of unworthy conduct. There is a time when it right to denounce wrongdoing outright. But there is also a time to pause and ask: how much damage will I do if I go down that road? Would it do more harm than good? This is not to advocate spineless, complacent acquiescence; rather, it is to invite thought about what is the best way of securing one's objective. In many situations it's easy to denounce someone as an offender. The law (rightly) has ways of indicating society's disapproval. The hard bit is changing an offender's behaviour.

Luke 24: 36b-48

As we read the various accounts of the post-resurrection appearances, we are driven to ask 'what point is the evangelist trying to make here?' For we cannot assume that the four evangelists recorded events just because they happened; they compiled their record of events because those events contributed to the message the evangelists were trying to get across.

We have here a story in which Jesus appears to terrified disciples, invites them to look at and touch his wounds, and eats food.

Remarkably, he then goes on to explain these astonishing events in terms of their Jewish inheritance (the law must be fulfilled). Unfortunately Luke does not tell us exactly which Scripture references he has in mind when, for example, he declares that 'the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead in three days'.

In fact Luke moves almost hastily – as if such matters were merely incidental to his conclusion: 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed ...'. Amazing as the events of recent days might be, they happened not merely to be placed on the record; they are the prelude to the whole Christian mission.

So – why, do you think, does Luke include such details about this particular occasion?