

To be honest, last Sunday in St Mark's, I had trouble concentrating. I think it had been too long since I'd been anywhere, let alone to church. My mind wandered as I listened to Philip, but right at the end of his reflection on the reading from Mark's Gospel, these words penetrated the fog in my mind:

*'When we feel that we have failed, let ourselves down, let others down, that we have no right to be a proclaimer of the Good News, take heart because like Peter and all the others we are called, because no matter what, we are loved beyond measure. The Cross and the Empty Tomb proclaim it.'*

I welcomed the reminder that we are 'loved beyond measure' and so are to 'take heart' even when we know we could have done better. This carried over into my thoughts about this week's reading, from John's Gospel, where we see how Jesus draws back to himself those who have let him down; and how he restores in them the 'heart' to go on in his service.

It struck me that Jesus didn't give the disciples very long to get over the shock of seeing him alive again. Suddenly he's there, somehow finding them and passing through locked doors; but they are assured that it is definitely him. Mary Magdalene was a reliable witness. Jesus is not a ghost but flesh and blood, bearing the fresh scars of what he so recently suffered. He really is a human being that has come back to life. His first words are an offering of Peace. Surely that's what they need – to be calm; to still their minds; to let go of fear. However, judging by what he then says, it's more a case of 'Settle down – clear your heads – focus!' There's work to be getting on with, but what comes next is not a matter of business-as-usual or getting back to normal. There's barely a moment to let the truth sink in or rejoice in it, before Jesus turns to the future. There is new work for them. They will have a new authority to forgive sins and for this they will need new power - the Holy Spirit – here, receive it! At this point John turns to the language of the second chapter of Genesis where God shapes the form of Adam from dust and breathes life into it. Jesus 'breathes' into the disciples and they receive the Holy Spirit. This is the language and imagery of a new creation, and they have no choice about being part of it. Just as his Father sent him, Jesus is sending them. No choice, not even for stubborn Thomas. Given the urgency Jesus displays in this first meeting with the disciples, I think it is quite extraordinary how patient Jesus then is with Thomas, but he's not going to let him go. He is willing to wait, to tolerate the scepticism and then to entertain Thomas' demands for his own special assurances. Neither with Thomas nor with the other disciples is there any direct rebuke for the way they have let him down. Even the gentlest of censure – in verse 29 – has come to serve as a blessing and encouragement to the generations since who, like us, 'have not seen and yet have come to believe'.

What has passed has been dealt with and what lies ahead is all that matters, and forgiveness is where it starts, and is central to their new fellowship and ministry. How else could they become agents of forgiveness if they had not first themselves been forgiven? Being forgiven, they are transformed from despair to joy, and lifted up into a new relationship with God. In Thomas we see a dramatic transformation from deepest distrust to the height of belief. This *is* his Lord Jesus who died, but now lives. That same Jesus, yet not the same. In that moment, Thomas sees both the human, *and* the divine and acclaims Jesus as: 'My Lord *and* My God'. The world is indeed changed forever.

Right now, I know I'm not unique in longing for the restful type of 'Peace'; peace of mind, a break from apprehension and worry. I am blessed because I can look forward to a certain degree of 'getting back to normal'. However, I can't ignore that getting back to normal is the last thing that billions of people will want. Even before the pandemic their 'normal' was insufferably awful. For them 'good news' could be something as simple as a place to rest and feel safe, or clean water and sufficient food, or to see their children healthy, and educated. The list is endless. Too many have been let down, and desperately need a new beginning and new life here and now. This is daunting but can't be sidestepped. We know we all are called to do something, great or small, to proclaim the Good News of a new life. It would seem overwhelming if we didn't know that we go forward in the name of the Risen Lord, and we are not alone, but in a fellowship bound together by forgiveness and love beyond measure with those who witnessed his Risen presence. We may take heart - we 'who have not seen and yet have come to believe' that we all are in God's hands, and we too go out to serve Him in the power of the Holy Spirit. May He light our path and direct our steps.

AMEN