

Sunday 8 April, 2018

*A sermon preached by the Dean, The Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe*

Today's gospel and epistle reading give us an insight into what it was that the evangelists set out to do when they wrote down their reflections on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Both in the epistle and the gospel that bear his name, John sets out a record for later generations, invites future hearers and readers to consider carefully the life and works of Jesus Christ, with the intention that they – we – might place our trust in Christ and come to believe. At the end of today's gospel reading, John tells us about his selection criteria for his record of Jesus' works: there are many more signs that Jesus did 'in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But *these* are written so that you might come to believe, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you might have life in his name'.

John sets out to write down for us everything that might enable those of us who did not have the privilege of meeting and hearing Jesus speak, did not touch him nor saw him heal or restore to life, to be touched nevertheless by the record of Jesus' words and actions. 'We declare to you ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands', he affirms at the beginning of his first letter. John writes down his life story of Jesus so that, through him, we might have a share in what it was like to walk with Jesus. This is not to set out the definitive biography of Jesus – indeed, John is explicit that there are many more things he could tell us – but, in the tradition of the histories of the classical period – to set down a persuasive argument as to why others should share the belief he himself had in Jesus. John writes his gospel and epistles to enable us to place our own trust in Jesus, and so to share in communion with John, and all those who, through the ages, have read or heard the words and works of Jesus and believed: 'we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us', John writes. This, then, is a story to help us believe; a story to help us change our lives because that is what Jesus set out to do.

And so from the great poetic prologue of the Incarnation, in which John knows God to be both Word and Son, knows him to be the Light that the darkness will never overcome, and the rejection of the world will not diminish; from the very outset of his gospel until the closing verses of today's gospel reading, John retells the story of Jesus through the chronology of contention, taking us through the evidence for his firm and certain case that Jesus is indeed whom those who encounter him discover him to be: the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Son of God and King of Israel, the Messiah, and the Holy One of God. He places before us the words and deeds of Jesus to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed who he said he was: the water of eternal life; the bread of life; the light of the

world; the gate for the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, and the truth and the life; and the true vine whose will for all is to abide in him and he in them so that they may bear much fruit. In the Easter season we will be examining John's reasoning in detail through our close study of John's story. Today's readings are an invitation to understand why John, and the other gospel writers, took such care to reason with future generations of readers to share not only their *evidence*, but their *belief*: 'we declare to you what we have seen and heard that you also may have fellowship with us'.

The fellowship that John commends to us, his hearers, is not only fellowship with him, and the other Bible writers. The whole purpose of his gospel and epistles is to invite *us* to share in a far greater fellowship than that: at the very beginning of his gospel, John told us that reason God sent Jesus into the world, the reason 'the Word was made flesh', was to 'dwell with us'. The Greek word used by John is rich in meaning – God's Word 'tabernacled with us', 'set up home' with us, 'remained' with us. And just as God's Word made his home among us, so he has his home with God the Father: 'believe my works', Jesus had told his hearers, 'even if you do not believe me, so that you may know and understand that God the Father is in me and I am in the Father'. God the Father dwells in the Word, the Word became human and dwelt among us, so that all who see and hear may know and understand, may come to believe that through this action of grace, humankind is forever tied to God. 'Abide in me as I abide in you', Jesus encourages the eleven as they walk from the Upper Room of the Last Supper to the garden of betrayal: 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love'. If we come to believe, like John has, that Jesus is God made flesh and that God has come to live among us, so that *we* might live with God, *then* the fellowship that believers will enjoy, John tells, is not just with those who share this belief: 'truly *our* fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'.

For John there can be no greater joy than people coming to understand and believe that God wants to come close to each human being, and that he has set up home with us, become one of us, so that we might share in this life-giving, life-transforming exchange. All may share in the life of God, if they share the same confidence that John sets before us, his hearers. And to know that others can share in this life-giving truth fills John with great joy: 'we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete'. The joy of knowing others share in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, of knowing others share in the life-giving power of God himself, share 'truly' in the fellowship we have with the Father and with his Son – for John *that* joy completes all joys. It is greater than the pain of parting of the disciples on Good Friday, greater than the joy of seeing Jesus alive on Easter morning, because it is not only for *one* day, *one* moment, but *forever*. It is the joy of witnessing Mary hear and recognise Jesus' voice early on the first day of the week; the joy of Thomas proclaiming Jesus as Lord and God; the joy of seeing future generations of witnesses come to believe the truth John holds:

'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'. Blessed are *we*, Jesus is saying, for believing in him to be our Lord and God – *without* having heard, having seen with our eyes, having looked at or touched. Blessed are *you* who believe and share in fellowship through the writings of the witnesses who did see and hear, felt and touched, and so understood and knew Jesus to be their Lord and God.

We, too, may share their knowledge and understanding, John tells us. *Our* recognition of Jesus is no less important than Thomas' or Mary's. We may not have the benefit of seeing Jesus in his physical resurrection body among us, John knows, but we have the testimony, the declaration, he sets before us, so that we also may share in fellowship with John and the other disciples and, through our fellowship with the witnesses of resurrection, share in fellowship with the risen Lord Jesus and the Father. *That* fellowship, John tells us in his gospel story, is granted us through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the One sent 'to teach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus said'. Twice in the story of the cross and resurrection, Jesus breathes on his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit: as he dies on the cross, and now in the Upper Room. And in both cases his gift of the Holy Spirit has a specific purpose: he gifts us the Spirit, so that we might know our shortcomings, and seek forgiveness for them. 'Receive the Holy Spirit', Jesus tells the eleven, 'if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained'. The Spirit sent from the cross is sign that all is accomplished, and the world reconciled to God: 'the blood of Jesus, God's Son cleanses us from all sin, and we have fellowship with one another', John writes in our epistle. The Spirit breathed on the eleven is sign that the work of reconciliation wrought on the cross is ongoing and present: 'if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven'.

The key to the fellowship that completes the joy of our Evangelist, is recognising and bringing our shortcomings to God. We can do so in confidence that God will hear our confession, and understand our sin: 'we have an advocate with the Father', John assures us. One who knows what it is like to live and suffer as we do, who knows what temptation and loneliness, betrayal and denial look and feel like, who knows what human joy and love is like, who knows what human death is like. And that advocate, John tells us, not only pleads with the Father that all who come to him may be forgiven, but is himself the offering made once and for all to cover all human sin: 'not for ours only', not only for the sins of those who have read or heard, and experienced the blessing of belief, but for 'the sins of the whole world'. For John it is *this* knowledge that is the greatest joy of all: 'that you may come to believe ... and that through believing you may have life in Christ's name'. None of us in this life will have our doubts taken away by touching the body of the risen Lord like Thomas. But the words of those who 'heard, saw with their eyes, looked at and touched concerning the word of life' are given us, together with the gift of the Holy Spirit of forgiveness and life, so that *we* might share the same certainty and fellowship that they did. They have seen and,

through their writings 'testify and declare to *us* the eternal life that was with the Father'. They already share the joy of knowing their own lives restored, transformed through their fellowship – their close contact – with the Word of life, Jesus Christ. And yet they set out to enable us to share in their joy, because *that* will complete their own joy.

This Eastertide, I invite you to embark with us on the journey of discovery of the joy of salvation: I invite you to read again John's story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Take time to listen to the witness of John. Examine his contention. Question – like Thomas – his conclusions, and open like him your hearts to the message of life. And if that journey will shed light on those things in your lives that may still be dark, then bring those darkneses to Christ's radiant light. Take courage that this experience is not isolated – but that all who consider the truth of the message of Christ will be confronted with a Truth that brings our own behaviours into stark contrast. Be assured that all people (John our writer first among them) *have* experienced and *will* experience sin, as part of their own journey of testing the testimony of the witnesses of the resurrection. As you set out, take comfort that Christ's cross and resurrection have taken away the intrinsic power of sin and evil, and that he delights in forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. I pray that, as you journey through Eastertide, you may feel the presence of the risen Lord with you: through the pages of the Scriptures, the fellowship of your worship, the joy of the assurance of sin forgiven, and the hope of eternal life revealed to all people through the witnesses of the resurrection, so that we, who have not seen and yet have come to believe, may be numbered with them among the blessed.

Now unto him that is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Saviour be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.