

Sermon for Sunday 23 April 2017 (Easter 2)

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Imagine --- or perhaps remember --- training hard to do something new. This may have involved a new job, or a new skill, such as driving or sailing. You've worked alongside a trusted mentor or teacher, who's given you good opportunities for practice and rehearsal and you're beginning to feel reasonably confident – itching even to get on with things on your own. Then suddenly, you're on your own – and things are very different. You're scared, uncertain, lacking in confidence --- adrift and feeling lonely as you shoulder the responsibility of this new stage.

Of course what happens next, is that usually the training kicks in, you take a deep breath, remembering perhaps words of wisdom from your tutor, and step by step you manage to do what you've been trained to do – increasing in confidence and authority and eventually working with a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

In today's readings, we see the disciples of the risen Christ in a similar situation. For three years they'd worked and trained alongside Jesus, learned from him and tried, with varying degrees of success, to understand what he wanted them to do. They hadn't doubted their commitment to him as he led them on physical and spiritual journeying, but the events surrounding his arrest and crucifixion had tested them and emotionally shaken them beyond anything they could have imagined. And now, in the days after his resurrection he returned to them, the same, but different ---in this world, but of another one to tell them that the task they'd trained for was truly theirs. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". No wonder we read of their fear as well as their rejoicing.

In theory, they should have been prepared. In reality, the enormity of their commission terrified them. There is a huge difference between achieving something and implementing it. A composer achieves a piece of music as he writes it down on manuscript paper, but it is for the musicians to implement it as they give it life in a performance. Jesus had achieved, in his death and resurrection, God's salvation for the world; now it was the task of his followers to spread the news of this gospel so that each soul on earth should have access to it. They were given the authority to forgive sin – or to retain sin; how could they be ready to do that? And this was a command from their Lord, not a request. No wonder they huddled together in disarray; no wonder Thomas took shelter in his disbelief.

But Jesus believed the disciples were capable of doing all that was to be asked of them. He had chosen them, loved them and taught them well, and now had one further gift for them.. he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Nothing could be achieved in their own strength, but through the gift of the Spirit, they could be the instrument of God’s forgiveness. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they could continue and implement Jesus’ work, not only in Israel, but throughout the world.

The disciples had a choice. They could simply have returned to their homes in the aftermath of that first Easter and led good lives, among their families and friends. In these quiet church days, after the busy-ness of Lent and Easter, I’ve thought about them often – how they experienced the whole gamut of human emotions and experiences in such a short space of time. It must have been quite a temptation to return to the quiet predictable life of the fishing villages they called home.

But they didn’t; they committed themselves to God’s vision and were transformed; we see something of that in our readings. Thomas, the dogged disciple who’d sometimes found Jesus difficult to understand and had missed the joyous Easter day experiences of the others, travels from doubt to that glorious acclamation, “My Lord and my God!” --- the first person in John’s gospel to recognise Jesus directly as God.

Peter, headstrong, impulsive and so bitterly ashamed of denying Jesus, found the courage and the eloquence to come out of hiding and to declare publicly a truth both dangerous and miraculous. “This Jesus God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses.”

They were transformed, setting out to do the job they were trained for, hesitantly at first but with increasing authority and confidence. They set out alone, or in pairs, without the physical presence of Jesus, but armed with the gift of His Spirit, shouldering all the responsibility and decision making involved in implementing the commission he’d given them, following his example loyally at whatever personal cost. And thanks to them—and countless others throughout the centuries, we are here in church today. We join with them as Easter people to say, “Alleluia—this Jesus God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses.”

As Easter people, we are also disciples of our risen Lord and he says to us, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” We, too, are inheritors of his commission and we all have apart to play in speaking out the news of that first Easter day. We do this as individuals in the way we live our lives. We may not be called to powerfully heroic deeds, such as those recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. Witness in seemingly simple ways --- a lift to church for an elderly neighbour—can be just as eloquent.

However, in the troubled waters of our modern society, as Christians, we cannot afford to remain silent about our faith. The Easter message is greatly needed by so many. If you will, we are to become musicians, disciples with the task of implementing Christ's manuscript. As with players in an orchestra, all of us have a part to play, great or small, all of us need to be involved. We need to continue to ask for the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all that we plan to do and we need to offer support and encouragement to each other. Our steps may be small to begin with, but with confidence and faith we pray that as we share the joyous message of our faith we may be transformed – as individuals , as a church and above all, as agents of transformation within the wider communities in which we live and work and learn and play. “Alleluia--- this Jesus God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Amen.