**Coming back together**

**Psalm 133**

**John 20:19-31**

 Did you know that one of the names given to the Sunday after Easter is *Quasimodo Sunday?* When I first read about it I was wondering why on earth, would anyone want to name this holy day after the Hunchback of Notre Dame. But when I read on, it turned out it was, in fact, the other way round. The Hunchback got his name from the Second Sunday of Easter, because according Victor Hugo’s novel, he was found as an abandoned, disfigured baby on the steps of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on the day, which was already called Quasimodo Sunday. Apparently, the name comes from the Latin words *Quasi modo geniti infantes...* the first few words of a Gregorian chant traditionally sang as an introit on the Second Sunday of Easter, which, in turn are part of a quotation from Peter’s First Letter in the NT (1 Peter 2:2). Isn’t it wonderful what you can find on the pages of Wikipedia!

 There are, of course many other names this day acquired over the Christian centuries, like *Low Sunday, White Sunday, Divine Mercy Sunday* and so on, and they all have intriguing stories behind them. But we have to go to the traditions of Eastern Christianity to find the name that describes our theme for today. They call it *Thomas Sunday*, due to the Gospel story of Thomas, which is read every year on this same day in the Eastern churches. This is also true of Western Christianity. Though we don’t call it Thomas Sunday yet in all three years of the Common Lectionary for this Sunday we are given the passage we’ve just heard read to us from John’s Gospel. The great excitement, joy and celebration of Easter Day are always closely followed by the sober estimate of the lingering, ever present doubt.

 It seems we do need Thomas as much as we need the glorious good news of the Resurrection. He brings reality to our religious fervour. He represents something every Christian experiences in their faith journey at one time or another; when we get discouraged and our faith loses its sheen. When it seems we have lost the sure guidance of God and however desperately we are trying to follow Jesus, he is not there and no amount of hearing other people’s experiences will fill the gap in our soul.

The great disaster of the Crucifixion hit the disciples so hard that they scattered in all directions just to get away from the scene. But once it was all over, gradually, one by one they returned to their gathering place wanting to be together. Were they pleased to see each other? Did they want to talk about Jesus? Maybe. Did they want to support each other in their grief? Maybe. Did they blame each other out of guilt and shame and kept recounting who has done what whilst they were away and who came back first? Judging from their previous record, it is more than likely. But then the risen Christ comes to them, brings them joy and blesses them and makes them forget all those concerns as he re-focuses their attention to what comes next. Instead of a painful *post mortem*, condemning past failures this turns out to be more like an uplifting *daily briefing* entrusting them with new tasks ahead. And as if answering their unspoken question: *but how can we continue without you, Lord,* he shares with them his very own spirit so that, they may be energised by the same power that moved him.

And what is the task that will need all their might plus all the help they can get? It is forgiveness. Forgiveness for others, and we know how hard that can be, but I suspect also forgiveness for themselves. Feelings of guilt, whether acknowledged or not, can make people numb inside. Outwardly they may go through the motions of everyday life, but the doors of their souls are firmly shut. That’s why they need the healing presence of Christ with them, before they can ever contemplate going out and spreading the good news of his forgiveness.

But as we know Thomas, one of the twelve, is not with them on this occasion. We don’t know why not, he must have had his reasons. He could have just popped out for a bit of fresh air.

Or he may have had some more serious misgivings about the whole Jesus enterprise now that Jesus was not around anymore. He could have thought, what’s the point? So, with his absence he misses out on a joyous encounter, which the others sum up with the words: “We have seen the Lord”. But that’s no help for Thomas, in fact, it just makes things worse. However many times they keep affirming their faith, it won’t change Thomas’ feeling of abandonment. A big gap is opening up between Thomas and the others and it wouldn’t be surprising if Thomas felt like leaving them for good.

 Yet, he does not leave. He goes back to them and stays with them in spite of his doubts and their ‘unreasonable’ faith. There must have been something good about this devoted but deeply flawed group of people, which drew Thomas back, made room for him with all the spiritual mess he was carrying with him and finally facilitated the healing Thomas needed. Is there a lesson here for us as a group of God’s people in this place, I wonder?

 Just recently, I have come across a lovely story about a dried out wooden bucket, which lay discarded by the outbuildings of a farm a few yards away from the well. A couple of travellers came upon it. The younger one, seeing how the daylight was showing through between the dried out wooden slats, remarked ‘this bucket would never hold water again’. But the older one had other ideas. He picked up the bucket, took it to well and tied it to the well rope. He then let it drop into the well and the two of them went on their way. When in a couple days the travellers came back the same way and pulled up the bucket, it came up fully restored. The slats fitted beautifully, as they got rehydrated in the water and they were able to hold the clear, cool water of the well without losing a drop. Now it was ready to function again as a proper bucket doing the job it was originally created for.

 So, all right, Thomas missed out on the first encounter, but he came back and even though at that stage he could not believe what his friends believed, he stayed with them exposing his dried up inside to them. It is there, immersed in the company of the spirit-filled disciples that his restoration begins. I often wondered why could not Jesus appear to Thomas separately and convince him of the resurrection. But according to the Gospel story, he didn’t. It seems Jesus intended that the community gathered by him should be the community of mission together taking the good news of God’s forgiveness far and wide. In fact, the whole of the Bible speaks of faith as a communal activity, which flourishes best when practiced together. We need each other whether our faith is strong or weak.

 The short Psalm, Psalm 133 we heard earlier also testifies to this truth. It is a psalm classified by Walter Brueggemann, the famous American OT scholar as a psalm of well-being, or a *psalm of orientation.* With the use of two lively metaphors from everyday experience about fragrant oil and morning dew it perceives God’s blessing on God’s people as coming to them when they are together and in unity. It is a psalm for family reunions, or tribal gatherings, when the joy and orderliness of coming together reflects God’s creational intentions. We could make it our own song as we come together after the dry, separated months of isolation. *How good and how pleasant it is to come together as brothers and sisters in unity!*

 But for all this, when Thomas is back with his community, he is not ignored. Jesus singles him out and gives him all the proof he needs. It is – interestingly - not so much the touching of Jesus’ wounds, but the feel of his loving, accepting, forgiving presence. In human experience faith and doubt go together. Hans Kung, the great Swiss theologian, who sadly died just this last week, called it the ‘ebb and flow or the day and night’ of faith. Doubt is not a sin and it can even be helpful. But on the long run, doubt needs to be dealt with if it’s not to lead to an arid, ever-questioning, paralysed existence. Like the dried out wooden bucket, it needs to be taken to the source of the living water, into the company of the One, who has died and risen and continues to be the Living Water for all those seeking abundant life. And after the ‘spiritual re-hydration’ faith can flourish again, relationships can be restored and all of us, Thomas-es can be made fit for carrying the life-giving message to the world. Let it be so in our lives too.

*Erna Stevenson*

*Amersham Free Church*

*11 April 2021*