

'Alleluia! Christ is risen!' ...

I hope you have read the readings first – if not go and have a look now or you will be wondering, more than usual, what I am going on about. Yes it's one of those theological type ones.

Done it? Good.

Often when we have this Gospel reading we focus on Thomas, his doubts and his response to seeing Jesus. We talk about our own doubts and questions and recognise how difficult it must be for those who have no faith at all. But that is not what I wanted to focus on today.

The section that got me thinking most as I read this familiar Gospel was, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now setting aside the comparison between John's version of the gift of the Spirit and Luke's, (they had their reasons) let's look in more detail at what John was getting at.

Time and again, throughout all the Gospels, we are reminded of the importance of forgiving, and I have often spoken of its importance to the healing of the injured party. The truth, of course, is that forgiveness is difficult and the larger the injury the harder it is. But John includes the information as to what happens when you do not forgive and puts this instruction directly after the giving of the Holy Spirit and the commission to go into the world – they all go hand in hand. So this passage is not so much about how an individual goes about forgiving, as it is about how much the world needs to hear about God's grace and forgiveness.

In other words we are given a responsibility to continue Christ's work in the world; a burden that we can only carry with the gift of the Holy Spirit. John gives us a potted example of what can happen in the reaction of Thomas. How does this work? Well let's look at the reading in sections – try this ...

- We begin huddled together in a closed room – fear, doubt, confusion.
- Jesus enters and offers peace – the Grand Shalom of wholeness and healing.
- He offers them the proof they need that he is not simply a hallucination or ghost. His resurrection is true and therefore God's promise to defeat death has been accomplished.
- On realising the truth of Christ's victory they rejoice and are given yet more peace.

(Are you seeing the pattern of everyone's journey of faith yet?)

- Jesus commissions them to 'do as he did' and they/we are given the Holy Spirit to help them/us.

- (In John's Gospel Jesus' role is very much one of showing people the truth of the Father's love – those who 'see' recognise their need to repent and be forgiven, those who 'don't see' completely miss the opportunity and remain unaware of God's forgiveness and continue in spiritual darkness)

(Do the disciples do this? It's the disciples – of course they don't!)

- One week later – they are STILL in the closed room.
- The one person they have tried to convince was Thomas – a friend who knew Jesus – and they couldn't even get the message across to him. (No one said it was going to be easy) Still they have laid the ground work – even that little bit is sufficient for Jesus to work with.
- Jesus enters and once again offers peace.
- Thomas, on encountering the risen Christ, believes ... he physically sees and believes.
- Jesus pronounces his blessing on those who do not need to physically see but yet come to believe – they who see the truth through faith.

I can make it even simpler if you like ...

We, with the Holy Spirit, talk with others about the difference Jesus has made in our lives. They then have two choices: They believe, encounter Jesus, receive his peace and forgiveness; or they don't and continue their lives without knowing his peace and forgiveness.

The choice, of course, is theirs – but we need to go out and do the groundwork.

In a funny way this virus has forced us out of our closed room – i.e. the church building – back into the world, where Jesus always intended us to be. Of course we might be stuck in other rooms at the moment but continuing to live our faith every day, no matter what, is one way of helping others encounter the risen Christ in their own closed rooms. And, let us be honest here, there has been some excellent showing of God's love by you guys by phone, computer, and other ways that the first disciples could never have imagined.

Well done to you all, and keep up the good work.

God bless and Happy Easter – **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Tracy