



A PASTORAL LETTER IN EASTERTIDE FROM BISHOP GREGORY

22nd April 2020

“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” (*John 20.25*)

One of the things that persuades me of the reliability of the Gospel accounts is the honest way in which the apostles are depicted. They generally come across as not very good at their job. If these are the cream of all Jesus’ disciples, they frequently misunderstand him, frequently make mistakes, get grand ideas, and bark up the wrong tree. Not unlike today’s Church leadership, you might say.

But that’s the point, faith is not about super-humanity, it is about ordinary folk, trying their best to walk with God through life. The quotation is one I suspect that you’ll recognise – especially if you’re following the lectionary, as it was last Sunday’s Gospel reading, where Thomas - doubting Thomas - expresses his scepticism about the Resurrection. We all know where it leads him.

We are not all vouchsafed an experience of the Risen Lord at the same level of Thomas’ experience, but we are allowed to have faith at Thomas’ level, expressing scepticism or doubt. If you’ve been following these letters, you’ll know how great a fan I am of the Book of Psalms. It seems to me that they speak out of every human experience – joy, wonder, fear, anger, bitterness, cynicism. They are united however, by one great attribute, the readiness to be honest to God and the readiness to speak, to pray, from what the heart is saying.

Our prayer should be like that, honest to God – the heart speaking to the heart, a phrase that so spoke to John Henry Newman, the great theologian and Roman Catholic convert, that he chose it as his motto, albeit in Latin – “Cor ad Cor loquitur”.

In this time of coronavirus, we are going to go through periods of doubt and bewilderment. Why does a good God allow such suffering? Do I have enough faith to see me through? Has the Easter message got any power to speak into my reality at this time? We are all Thomas at times. I have to be honest myself, I don’t have any explanation as to why God allows viruses to inflict so much destruction in this world, and each person behind the statistic is a real person loved and lost, so full of potential and snatched away. Nonetheless, God’s heart speaks to mine: “I care”, he says, “be the agent of my love.”, “I am with you, rest your uneasy heart on me.”

Paul, at one point, says that prayer almost has to be at times “sighing too deep for words” (Romans 8.26) simply because sometimes our faith is so battered that the words won’t come. Can I encourage you in your prayers this week? Can I encourage you to pray with the honesty of Thomas and the psalmist, and to speak from your heart to the heart of Jesus?

While I can’t find God in the virus, I do see him in the response of so many, the resilience and courage of the carers for whom we clap or ring our bells on Thursdays, the careful consideration of the needs of the vulnerable by the faithful – and others – in our communities, in the dedication of the clergy to continue in prayer and communicate their prayer so that others might join them. On one level, these are simple human acts, but for me they shimmer around the edges with the glint of God’s eternal Love.

Every blessing be with you,

+Gregory Newman