



Second Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 24 April 2022

READINGS

Acts 5: 27-32; Psalm 118: 14-29; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-31

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.”

John 20: 23

Being the first Sunday after Easter, our task is to appropriate and make sense of the reality of the resurrection which, incidentally, John is attempting to do in our Gospel reading. There were various theories floating around at the time of Jesus' resurrection, some of which later became heresies, which tried to explain the resurrection. Matthew's Gospel, for example, says the Jewish priests spread a rumour that Jesus' disciples stole his body, thus explaining the empty tomb.

In thinking about the resurrection though, it is helpful to appreciate the great difference between Jewish and Hellenised worldviews when it comes to the soul and the body. Greek thought was more dualistic than Jewish thought. It held that, at death, particularly if one was to enter any kind of enlightened or saved state, there was a necessary separation of body and soul where the body was viewed as inferior to the soul, as something negative that needed to be dispensed with.

By contrast, the Jewish mind had a more unitive picture of the human make-up such that, on dying, the individual in their entirety descended to Sheol – which was by no means equivalent to Christian hell, but simply the abode of the dead. Being raised from the dead, in the Jewish context then, would mean returning in bodily form from Sheol. This idea is incongruent, perhaps even repugnant to, the Greek mind which viewed the body, and particularly dead bodies, disparagingly.

Now as a result, within Hellenistic or Hellenised contexts (and because soon after Jesus died the message of the Gospel spread relatively widely), fairly ingrained doctrinal positions developed which denied the bodily form of Jesus, or at the very least his bodily resurrection. The most common of these, which took various local expressions, was a heresy now referred to as Docetism. The name comes from the Greek word, *dokeō*, which means “to seem” and connotes “illusion”. The position of Docetists was to deny the bodily form of Jesus, either in its entirety or as being present after the resurrection. Instead, they claimed that through some form of apparition, Jesus merely “seemed” to be physically present, either for the duration of his ministry or once allegedly raised.

The account of Thomas in John 20 comes out of such a context. It is polemical in its attempt to assert the corporality of Jesus as well as bodily continuity between Jesus' pre- and post-resurrection bodies. Jesus' statement that those believing without seeing Jesus “in the flesh”, as the disciples did, would be particularly blessed is meant as an incentive to successive generations of disciples or converts.

Why is this important and why was Docetism declared a heresy? Soteriologically, i.e. in terms of our understanding of how Jesus saves humanity, it is important because humanity cannot be fully saved or redeemed if Jesus is not both fully human and divine. More directly, if we fail to adequately appreciate the bodily presence of Jesus – his corporality in pre- and post-resurrection states – we risk subscribing to false binaries which impoverish our faith.

Like various forms of Hellenistic thought at the time, we tend to think that it is the soul's job to somehow escape the body, the material world, and the corruption it is plagued by, in becoming pure and ethereal spirit. This is a fundamental negation of the Gospel which says that "God so loved the world," (John 3:16) and that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) and that "the home of God is among people" (Rev.21:3). Our task, in collaboration with Christ, is not to escape the world but to redeem those aspects of it which are in need of Christ's saving. Toward this end, and another indication from our Gospel reading that agency lies with us, is the mini Pentecost, or Pentecost prelude, which John recounts.

It represents a seismic shift which perhaps we often lose sight of. The system of Torah was predicated upon various rules, regulations and gradated sacrifices, the primary goal of which were to keep people as far as possible in a state of ritual purity. Sin contaminated or destroyed this state of purity, hence the requirement of the various rules, regulations and gradated sacrifice to restore and maintain it.

All of this is done away with in the sense that forgiveness of sins is no longer predicated on fulfilment of the Law, but on the Holy Spirit, on the Spirit's presence and acceptance amongst believers, and on a willingness to forgive – "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Somehow, there is continuity between our lived, corporal experience, and the state we pass on to from that. Far from the former being negated or disparaged in the Gospel account, through Jesus' injunction to put our fingers in the holes of his hands and in his side, he utterly affirms it. In doing so, Jesus goes a step further into designating this humble state a medium for the saving work of God.