

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 3rd July 2022 (Trinity 3)
John 20: 24 - 31
Ephesians 2: 19 - 23
'Members of God's Household'

Good morning, welcome to everyone both in Church and on Zoom.

Let's Pray

We have two quite different readings today; but, let's start with the usual questions: What jumped out at you from today's readings? What made you think? What puzzled you? What challenged you?

I'm going to look first at the Gospel reading, then we'll look at the reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Does anyone know who we celebrate in the Church calendar today? - The Apostle Thomas. He's often called 'doubting Thomas'; but from my reading of today's Gospel, that's a bit unfair.

For a start the word 'faithless' which we read in v. 27 is not faithless, or doubting in the original language, but 'unbelieving'. So if we rewrite Jesus' words to Thomas as "Do not be unbelieving, but believe!" It puts a totally different spin on the way Jesus spoke to Thomas, doesn't it?

It is interesting that the writer of John's Gospel uses two names for 'Thomas' The second one is 'Didymus' – actually they *both* mean 'twin'; Didymus is the Greek, but Thomas was originally Aramaic! But the way it's written clearly identifies Thomas, and gives credibility to the story.

So, after the crucifixion, the disciples continued meeting together in a locked room - probably because of real fear - and we're told Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst and greeted them with the traditional greeting: 'Shalom' which is usually translated 'Peace!'

We're told that to help them realise he wasn't a ghost, but really Jesus, He showed them the scars in His hands, and the wound in His side.

Then, He gave them His instructions (commissioned them): 'As the Father has sent me, so I'm sending you.' And we're told He 'breathed the Holy Spirit on them'. Not surprisingly, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and also with joy. There's no doubt this was a life changing event, in many ways.

In the reading, we're told, in a way that gives powerful emphasis to the story, that Thomas wasn't there when the others met Jesus, and filled with joy *and*

the Holy Spirit. No wonder he was a bit miffed when they told him about it! Actually, the tense in the original language means 'they kept on telling him!

When he heard about it – Thomas obviously found it hard to believe; he knew without any doubt of Jesus' cruel death; so, it wasn't unreasonable to need assurance that this really was Jesus the others had met – and he came up with a clear prescription of what it would take to convince him, but it's obvious that he truly wanted to believe.

So, when he did meet Jesus face to face, Jesus knew exactly what Thomas had said – and what his requirements for faith were!

Thomas wanted to believe and a week later he was there, when they met, and Jesus came again. At once Jesus offered Thomas' stated needs! Actually, he needed to see Jesus to be convinced and Thomas made one of the most profoundly simple and yet deeply theological testimonies in the Gospels .. "My Lord and my God!"

What a wonderful blessing for Thomas, and what a wonderful assurance for us today, Jesus wants to bring us all the way from unbelieving to total belief!

It is totally reassuring that God, who created us, knows exactly what will bring us to faith in Him. I'm sure Thomas's testimony and his firm belief has a lot to say to us. Jesus wants us to be '*not unbelieving but believing*'; and He's prepared to meet us just where we need to be met.

It doesn't matter who we are, or what has happened in the past; Jesus will meet us right where we are!

And that leads me into Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus. We read that he encouraged them, by saying: "You're no longer foreigners or strangers - you're fellow citizens with God's Holy People - members of God's Household - built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with King Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Paul says: In Jesus the whole building is fitted together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Paul says 'You, too, are being built up together in Him, into a place God will live by the Spirit.'

But, we have to understand that if we are members of God's family, His household, we all have responsibilities as members of the family. Jesus told us about some of them earlier in John's Gospel; 'This is my command to you: Love one another in the same way that I have loved you'. (John 15: 12)

Loving God is easy, because He is always benevolent towards me; but loving my neighbour can be really difficult.

As I was writing this, I thought of the young man whose mother I buried a couple of years ago. I was warned 'he has an alcohol problem'. Sure enough, when I went to visit him to plan the funeral he was drunk; he was drunk at the funeral, and we had several unpleasant interruptions during the service. I felt immensely sorry for him, but I'm called to **love** him, that's more difficult.

But Jesus said: 'If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you ... and He said: The world hates you for this reason: that you are not from the world. No, I chose you out of the world.' (John 15: 18)

You see, the responsibilities of being members of God's household are becoming clearer. Being a Christian is *not* a soft option.

Last week, I told you briefly about my friend, Hilmy, in Malaysia, who knows all about that. When he became a Christian, his parents disowned him; his employers made him sign a form giving up his pension rights; and, a little later he was put in prison, without trial, on suspicion of telling other Muslims about Jesus.

He was under suspicion of 'Bearing fruit for Jesus.' and Hilmy openly admits he was guilty of that! Ask yourself, if the law was changed here, could you be found guilty too? Jesus calls us to show His love – that's very difficult.

As Christians, Jesus calls us to follow His example, to be 'different'- to stand apart from the world; and the world cannot stand, or understand, people who are different. If they didn't understand who Jesus was, despite everything He did to make it clear – healings and miracles – why should they appreciate who we are, and what we stand for, as Christians?

We're called to tell them, but shouldn't be surprised if they don't understand. We should be concerned if we're considered successful by the World's standards.

Hilmy was interrogated in prison for two years. He got to know the two men who interrogated him, day after day, very well. Suddenly, after a vision he received from God, which he shared with his interrogators, Hilmy was inexplicably released without any warning.

Do you know what he did, the day after his release? He phoned the prison, and invited his two interrogators out to lunch.

It was a big surprise to them – I doubt if any of their previous prisoners had ever done that! "Why have you done this?" they asked over the meal. Hilmy's reply was simple: "Because Jesus tells me to love you!" I pray that I could be that faithful, in a similar situation!

Fortunately, Jesus doesn't leave us to get on with the impossible task alone.

He promised to send us the Holy Spirit and He promises the Holy Spirit will testify about Him.

Jesus tells us to join forces with the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel that the world, which is tied up with sin and hatred, desperately needs to hear!

It is not easy; but we're promised the Holy Spirit will go with us. We've been chosen; we are called. All we have to do is accept the call!

Hilmy knows about that too. I met him in Canada, where, despite an incredible shortage of money, he studied for five years and achieved a Master of Theology.

When he graduated he was offered a variety of jobs in Canada, but chose to be faithful, and answered the call to become a pastor. Where? Back in Malaysia, of course! In Kuala Lumpur, near the prison where he was detained, because he believes that's where he's called to bear fruit.

He knows it will never be easy. He lives with the constant risk of being re-imprisoned. But, slowly, step by step, he's leading folk to Jesus.

Please pray for Hilmy? And, as you do, pray for yourself; that the Holy Spirit will enable you to respond faithfully to Jesus' call wherever He calls you - even here.

Let's Pray