

**Evidence, Reassurance, Commissioning, Consequences: Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison, Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2018, St Peter's church Nottingham**

Today, the Sunday after Easter, is traditionally called 'Low Sunday'. This is because the Church's celebration of Easter – the most important day in the Church's year – has passed on from its climax, and we are now looking ahead to the two next great feast days, Ascension and Pentecost. It would be wrong, though, to move on too swiftly from the Easter theme – despite the fact that in the world around us the shops are now devoid of Easter eggs and indeed all traces of Easter have vanished from the supermarket shelves. For this period of forty days between Easter and Ascension is a time of continued celebration, a celebration of the period during which the risen Christ was seen on earth, talking with the disciples and being seen by many others (St. Paul says that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brethren at the same time – 1. Cor. 15.6). This is why our liturgical colours, over this period, are white, signifying the new light and life of Easter.

During this Easter season, we can do worse than to look closely at today's gospel reading, which tells how the risen Christ appeared to his disciples on two separate occasions. This passage (John 20. 19-31) contains much material about the meaning of Easter and the implications of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. I will mention four themes which emerge from it:

- (i) evidence
- (ii) reassurance
- (iii) commissioning
- (iv) consequences

(i) **Evidence**

St. John is aware that the fact of Jesus' resurrection needs to be supported by evidence. He carefully gives various indications, therefore, as to why the resurrection is believable:

First - on the evening of the first Easter Day, after he had appeared to the women at the tomb, Jesus appears to the disciples by coming to them in a room which was locked. He has not somehow avoided dying, but he is now in his resurrection body, to which even locked doors are not a barrier.

Second – Jesus is seen not just by one or two disciples; the strong implication is that several of them are present. While the evidence of women in first-century Israel was not always thought to be reliable, he has now appeared to a group of men.

Third - he appears – in the same locked room – a week after the first appearance, and shows them his wounds, with the specific intention of showing the disciple Thomas that he has really died and has risen. He tells Thomas to touch the wound in his side, which dispels his doubts.

(ii) **Reassurance**

As well as convincing the disciples that he has truly risen, he reassures them that all will be well. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells them not to be afraid. He now greets them with the words, “Peace be with you”. This was a common form of greeting in ancient Israel (and still is today). But the use of the word ‘shalom’ – peace – is significant. ‘Shalom’ refers to the well-being that comes from God; it means more than our word ‘peace’. It refers to all that is good, all that represents God’s blessing upon us. (It is this sense of well-being, of blessing which we wish for one another when we use the words ‘peace be with you’ in the Eucharist).

Jesus knew that the disciples would be afraid; so he reassures them that all is well; God’s purposes are being fulfilled.

(iii) **Commissioning**

Jesus makes it clear that his rising from the dead is not an end in itself. He has a task for the disciples, which is to continue his work on earth, on his behalf. So he bestows upon them the Holy Spirit, symbolising the breath of the Spirit by breathing upon them (the Spirit was seen as the breath – pneuma – of God). He sends them out to be his representatives, his missionaries: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20.21). As a sign of the divine authority he has given them, he gives them the power to forgive sins on God’s behalf. These are acts of commissioning; they show certain aspects of the task which Jesus entrusted to his disciples, to establish and build the Church. Alongside these responsibilities, he also gave them the task of baptising people and making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28. 18); of teaching believers about the faith (Matthew 28. 20); and of caring for the flock of believers (a task specifically entrusted to Peter – John 21. 15ff).

(iv) **Consequences**

Jesus is clear about the consequences of his resurrection and of the work which he has given his disciples to carry out. These are that people should believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they should have life in his name (John 20. 31). In other words, he invites people to have faith in him, and to believe that through his resurrection his heavenly Father has demonstrated that he is the Son of God. This in turn enables the lives of all those who believe and trust in him to be transformed by the power of his love, mercy, and compassion, as a new way of living opens up before us in which sorrow and suffering, selfishness and spiritual stagnation will not have the final word.

Evidence; reassurance; commissioning; consequences: we've looked at each of these four aspects of two appearances by the risen Christ to the disciples, and seen something of the remarkable impact which his resurrection had upon them. But the resurrection was only the beginning. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Church was to spread at a remarkable rate. The history of the Church has not, of course, been free from conflict, division and disagreement; we see this from the earliest days of the Church, and we still see it today. In spite of this, however, Jesus' resurrection has proved to be a truly pivotal point in history. For as a result of his resurrection a new way of living was given by Christ to the world; a way based on love not just towards those who love us, but also towards those who are hostile to us; a way of life centred on giving of oneself rather than on getting for oneself; and a way of life in which forgiveness and a genuine desire to understand those around us take precedence over our instincts for revenge and retribution. All of this is made possible in a new way by the power of Christ's love to turn our lives around when they become dominated by selfishness, greed and hurtful behaviour, and by his power to give us fresh hope and renewed life when we are beaten down, broken and battered by life's troubles. And when we reflect, more widely, upon the multitude of deeply worrying aspects of today's world, we can surely see that the whole world needs his redemptive, restorative, and rejuvenating power more than ever. Amen.