

20140427SecondOfEasterSermon 'Put your finger here' John 20.27

On Easter Sunday I spoke about the risen Christ being hard to comprehend in physical terms. According to the different Gospels, the women hugged his feet, Mary Magdalene is told not to touch him. One minute he was present the next he had disappeared. He ate food but he also seemed to be an apparition that wasn't recognised by his disciples. With the Ascension we are tempted to think that the risen Jesus is less physically present to us today than he was to the disciples before the ascension. But I believe that today's gospel story makes realise that this is not true.

You see, human contact is important in spite all the amazing advances in technology we have witnessed in the last several decades particularly on the internet and social media. People found it amazing that Alexander Bell could sing, "Little Mary had a lamb..." and be heard in another venue out of earshot through the telephone. Yet on Wednesday this week Karen coached a colleague in Japan in real time and visible to each other all via Skype. Karen commented that they could coach via the phone but visible contact was important.

Jesus appears in the upper room - making visible contact with his disciples twice in our Gospel. The second time he invites Thomas to go beyond visible contact and to touch him. Not just anywhere but to touch him in the most sensitive of places, in the wound inflicted so very recently before. I'm sure the wounds hadn't healed in the resurrection, they were still present, they were still raw and painful. This is so true with all our wounds too, even those inflicted many years past, can still be as raw as yesterday. There is a line in William Faulkner's novel Requiem for a Nun: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Something our country might be thinking about in 10 days time.

Put your finger here - What message is Jesus trying to convey to Thomas? Is he merely responding to Thomas's challenge - 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe'? I think Jesus is doing more than that. He is trying to get Thomas to understand the pain that humanity inflicts on others; understand the pain that those who love the Lord their God with all their hearts and souls and minds and strength inflict on others who, in their opinion, don't.

We can, like the other disciples, rejoice when we see the risen Lord, but the story is incomplete until Thomas is invited to connect with the pain of it all. Again, this connects the resurrection with the crowd violence, the lynching that caused it. There are so many places in literature where the suffering is intentionally forgotten or ignored. The comic super-heroes, Superman, Batman, Spider-man etc - they struggled mightily against seemingly overwhelming odds but the victory always overshadowed the conflict. Any wounds vanished. In the book of the Revelation, there is no description any of the blood and guts that was spilled. But Jesus doesn't allow his disciples to forget the suffering and the execution and the injustice - for it is only a recognition of the suffering, the execution and the injustice which might perhaps bring some changes in our own behaviour.

And our patron saint... it is only as the Lord showed Saul, as he travelled that road to Damascus to persecute people who were different, that he was persecuting the Lord, that Saul was converted. Metaphorically the risen Lord was saying to Saul - *Put your finger here* .

It is only a recognition of the suffering and the injustice, which might perhaps bring some changes to our relationships in society towards those who are different. It is only a recognition of the suffering, the needlessness of it all, which might perhaps bring some changes in our religion. It is only a recognition of the suffering, that a merciful Lord 'whose steadfast love endures forever' doesn't actually ever demand suffering, which might perhaps bring some global changes to existence.

Put your finger here - experience my pain – Jesus is not asking Thomas to accept responsibility for it! No, Thomas wasn't one of those who lynched Jesus.

Put your finger here – Nor is Jesus saying - see how innocent I am and how unjustified this was? No - *Put your finger here* - and understand how people hurt others - perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently - but more crucially how groups of people who marginalise, alienate and condemn others - inflict pain on millions - believing that they are justified.

Put your finger here - experience the pain of marginalisation, alienation and condemnation – Don't just proclaim me 'Lord!' or 'God!'

I saw a comment the other day which said that pain is the precursor to spirituality. Let's look at that for a moment. The ancients pondered the pain of child-birth and decided that there must have been a reason - and so the story of the eating of the forbidden fruit and God's threat to make women suffering in giving birth was born. Do you know that the New Zealand Kiwi, lays the biggest egg in proportion to its body size. That sounds a pretty painful egg to deliver if you ask me! I am not sure if I really want to worship a 'god' who inflicts this sort of pain on an innocent flightless bird because of the actions of a couple of humans centuries ago, half a world away.

The year 2014 is the Centenary of the start of WW1 where it is estimated 8 to 10 million people died. Not many of the immediate family of these people are still alive but the affects are still being felt by their descendents, pain is still being carried by many. And the Church? Isn't it just too busy proclaiming 'my Lord and my God' rather than putting our finger in the wounds as we are told – and thus connecting with people's real pain.

Today we see the abuse of those different from us – different gender, different sexual orientation, different nationality, different race, different religion. And how do we respond? And children who have been abused and survived – what do they want from the Church? They want the church to understand and appreciate the pain they have suffered. They say to the church: '*Put your finger here ..*'

So we must bring resurrection to others, not by imposing our spirituality on them as a panacea for all their wounds but as we recognise the validity of their pain and acknowledge the efficacy of their own spirituality in dealing with it.

'*Put your finger here*' invites us to connect with real life, to get our hands dirty, to attempt to deal with the messes humanity finds itself in - not to celebrate the Eucharist in all our finery as if our continuing exclusion of others who we don't like or think are too different from us, is going to make a scrap of difference in the real world. Actually celebrating 'Communion' this way will only serve to perpetuate division and discrimination.

In the field of marketing people are starting to realise that brands are becoming less important in our computer age. People are easily able to access users rating of their products on the internet, and buy according to these ratings. Companies that seek only to persuade will be replaced by those that truly seek to serve the real needs of the customer and surely this is precisely what Jesus did.

Based on ideas from Chris Heath in New Zealand