

2nd Sunday of Easter

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on 28 April 2019

Readings: Acts 5 vv 27-32 and John 20 vv 19-end

The gospel of John begins with a theological statement of great beauty, which we hear at Christmas. It unfolds with simple stories on which we hear elaborate theological commentaries. Much of how we understand the Christian faith is drawn from the interplay of the simple stories and the theological commentary. The gospel ends with the statement, explaining all that has gone before, saying that everything has been recorded so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

The gospel moves from complexity to a mix of simplicity and complexity to ultimate simplicity. And the reason for the gospel is so that we can believe. This was the end of the original text of St John's gospel, but, as we will hear next week, chapter 21 was added at a slightly later date. That's another story.

The question 'how can we believe?' is a basic question that is asked by all people and in all ages. Interestingly enough, the answer seems to change from time to time. The intellectual systems of thought and styles of teaching that inspired belief in earlier centuries don't seem to be as persuasive for people in later centuries.

Jesus has not changed at all. But the lens through which we look to see him at different times may have a different focus. Nevertheless, there are some common patterns; some universal truths about how human beings learn and are drawn into faith.

One of them is story. Stories have a power to touch us. Stories can affect us profoundly in ways we don't always understand. We humans have a need to hear stories from our very earliest days. One of the most intimate things we do is listen to each other tell the stories of our lives. The stories of Jesus, remembered in the gospels, have a power to communicate him that goes far beyond the text. The images raised by the stories come to life in our lives. Think of one of your favourite stories about Jesus. Why does it have a special power to move you? Think of today's gospel. Jesus says to Thomas, 'Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.' And Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God'.

In just a few words everything is made different. Now Thomas knows.

Think of a story about a person you love and how that story reveals the particular nature and identity of that person.

We can learn so much through stories.

Another way of learning is through relationships. Most of what is known by a child is knowledge gained through relationships with parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins and friends. In a sense, we can know very little outside of relationships. Think of someone special in your life. Think of all the things you know because you know that person and what you have learned with and from that person.

Many Christians speak of a personal relationship with Jesus. Some would say that the personal relationship exists because they believe. Other would say that belief exists because the personal relationship with Jesus, perhaps from a profound encounter or from a relationship that has simply grown and developed over the years has caused

them to believe. Some Christians are like Thomas, coming to a sudden moment of realisation and faith. But even before Thomas wanted to reach out to touch the risen Jesus, he was in relationship with Jesus, with Jesus' friends, his fellow disciples, who prepared him for his meeting with the risen Jesus. Many people come to know Jesus because they are introduced to him by someone with whom they have a relationship, whether family member or friend.

A third way that we know things is by thinking about them in a reflective way. We see many things and have many experiences. But unless we reflect on those things we see and experience, they have little meaning to us. There is a wonderful story in the early part¹ of St John's gospel about a royal official with a sick son. Jesus said, 'Go [home], your son will live.' When the man met with those who cared for the child he learned that the child began to recover at the very same moment that Jesus told him that his son would live. The royal official (perhaps he is the centurion that we meet in the other gospels in similar circumstances) might have been aware that Jesus healed his son. But he only really grasped it when he reflected upon the connections between what Jesus said and what the household slaves had observed.

A fourth way that we know is through intuition. We have hunches about a lot of things. We can also have them about God, Jesus and belief.

Many of us will find that our knowledge of God has developed in each of these ways or in a combination of them at different points of our lives.

It may be that a holy hunch is examined by prayer and reflection, then linked to a story coming from the stories we find in the Bible and further confirmed by family or friends. Or it may be that we have an experience that is determined to be of God after prayer and reflection. Then our Christians friends think and pray about it. That leads to Bible study and finally it becomes clear about where God is leading and why the experience is the launching pad for some new work or task.

Or it may work out in some way that is as yet not described.

But the purpose is that we believe. To quote the last sentence in John's gospel, 'These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

May God help us to use whatever means and opportunities he lays before us so that we can grow in faith and in discipleship.

¹ John 4 vv 46-54