

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER [C]

Acts 5: 12 - 16

Revelation 1: 9 - 13, 17 - 19

John 20: 19 - 31

“Mirrors and blue smoke, beautiful blue smoke rolling over the surface of highly polished mirrors... If somebody tells you how to look, there can be seen in the smoke great, magnificent shapes, castles and kingdoms, and maybe they can be yours. The ability to create the illusion of power, to use mirrors and blue smoke is found in unusual people.”

Jimmy Breslin: Notes From An Impeachment Summer, 1975

This is a description by an American writer, Jimmy Breslin, of President Richard Nixon in the Summer of 1974 when he's fighting three Articles of Impeachment by the House of Representatives for his role in the Watergate cover-up scandal.

Breslin's point is that, in the way a magician uses smoke and mirrors to create an illusion, and so deceive an audience, Nixon had been doing the same about himself to the American people.

I must say, it's never occurred to me before to talk about Richard Nixon, and Jesus in the same breath; but some people might have heard that quote from Jimmy Breslin.

If you don't know Jesus, then I suppose He might appear to be a 'mirrors and blue smoke' sort of person; creating the 'illusion of power' through His miracles, and promising 'castles and kingdoms' by His talk about the Kingdom of God.

Although Thomas - 'Doubting Thomas' as he's often known - had been with Jesus for three years, he still harbours doubts.

These bubble to the surface when the other Disciples tell him the dead Jesus, laid in the tomb on Good Friday, had just walked through a locked door, and appeared to them on the evening of Easter Sunday.

Jesus was an unusual, a unique man; but had He in those three years just been conjuring up 'beautiful blue smoke rolling over the surface of highly polished mirrors?'

John's Gospel begins with Jesus being acclaimed God with those beautiful words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jn. 1: 1

Jesus the Word - He who speaks God's word and reveals to us what God is really like - is truly God, and truly man.

Then, in today's passage, the Gospel comes full circle with Thomas recognising that this man, Jesus, is God in these words: "My Lord and my God!" Jn. 20: 28

Now all of the Disciples know that Jesus is God. They've become eye-witnesses. They've become the Church. They're ready to be sent out in the power of the Lord to declare to the world that: "He has risen!" Lk. 24: 6

This is what Jesus does when He appears to them beside Sea of Tiberias in the next chapter, the end of the Gospel.

He gives the Church - through the person of Peter - the three-fold mandate to: "Feed my lambs; Take care of my sheep; Feed my sheep." Jn. 21: 15 - 17

So Thomas, along with all the other Disciples, begins that unbroken chain of witness to the Risen Lord, which we here today are a link in.

I'm sure that Thomas, being the sort of character he was, still carried on teasing out in his mind the repercussions of the fact that Jesus had risen, and that he had actually seen Him, and touched Him.

Yet the Risen Jesus is the same Jesus Thomas had known as his friend for those three years, and seen hung on a Cross, and laid stone-cold dead in the tomb.

Here's Jesus with the marks of the nails in His hands and feet, and the wound in His side big enough to get your hand into.

This isn't a ghost, nor is it someone else pretending to be Him; neither is it a 'mirrors and blue smoke' trick.

This is Jesus; the same only different. He whom the grave-clothes could no longer constrain. Jesus, who has escaped death, the grave, the grave-clothes, and the embalming spices.

He who comes, and goes as though He belongs both in our world and in a different world; one which intersects with ours at various points, but doesn't use the same geography, or have the same physical restraints we live under.

If this is fiction, it's the strangest fiction ever written; but John doesn't intend it as fiction. It's fact.

He tells us in no uncertain terms why he's written his book - his Gospel:

"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." Jn. 20: 31

The characters that inhabit John's Gospel aren't cardboard cut-outs or players on a stage.

They're three-dimensional, and made of real flesh and blood; and Thomas is one such person.

This world-weary, free-thinking, dogged man who said to the other Disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Jn. 11: 16 as Jesus set off to visit his dead friend, Lazarus.

Thomas, who later complained to Jesus that He hadn't made things clear enough: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jn. 14: 5

And Thomas, the Disciple who: "Was not with the [other] disciples when Jesus came on the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together," Jn. 20: 24 & 19

In many ways Thomas is very contemporary in his outlook towards God. Seeking for proof that Jesus has risen from the dead, and not believing unless he sees for himself.

Hoping in the deep recesses of his heart that there is a God, but not wanting to commit himself in case it is all mirrors and blue smoke - a beautiful illusion.

I think a lot of people today are like Thomas - confused - like he said to the Lord: "We don't know. We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jn. 14: 5

Others are like Thomas after the Lord's Resurrection when he missed Jesus appearing to the others.

He wanted proof that Jesus had risen from the dead, which Jesus gave him; and Thomas had an open enough heart and mind to be convinced decisively.

Many of our contemporaries who think it's 'cool' and fashionable to be atheists aren't like that. They take this line: "Well, show me God, and then I'll believe. But even if you do I won't believe because it'll mean having to say I was wrong, and I know I'm not."

If, as John says in the first words of his Gospel, that the Word, who was God, has now made the invisible God visible in Jesus, then all of us who follow Christ have seen Him.

We've seen Him because of the evidence of the Apostles like Thomas, and the ongoing witness to Christ through His living voice speaking to us in His Church.

But more profound than that is the fact that when we come to the Eucharist we meet, and touch the same Risen Jesus, just as Thomas did, but under the humble appearance of bread and wine.

The same Jesus who forever bears the nail marks, and the spear thrust. Bears the wounds of love He who rose from a mattress of stone, folded His grave clothes, and saw and heard the stone rolling open:

"The morning that death was killed. [And] Things were never the same again [for any of us] after the morning that death was killed." Steve Turner: The Morning That Death Was Killed