

Sermon for 7th Sunday of Easter, 24th May 2020: Revd Dr Sean Cathie

It's very strange to be giving my first sermon in the West Hereford team, in this written form - a sermon, after all, is spoken and heard. In that living event our hearts may be touched and our minds renewed. May I suggest, then, that as you read these words, you do so without hurrying, imagining/seeing all of us sharing them together. Hopefully, this will help us open our hearts to the presence of our risen Lord. Like the disciples unknowingly meeting their Risen Lord, may we too be surprised .

The readings that we hear at this season from the Acts of the Apostles speak of the apostles' encounter with him, sometimes directly, as in today's reading, and sometimes through the encounters they have with others. Through these, they are gradually changed, as their understanding of what has happened changes. They move from an "earthly" to a "heavenly" understanding, from a view of the Kingdom in political terms, as something that is part of this age, to a view of it as belonging to the age to come. And that age, sometime in the future but also sometimes here and now, is when God's ways will be fully manifested and we shall know God fully and be fully known ourselves.

Like the disciples, we find it hard to make sense of this. It's easier to imagine it in terms of the world we already know, but better. Knowing God more fully is something else; it transforms how we see things. As an example, let me share an experience from a training event I went on as a curate. It was preparation for leading small groups in the parish. And it was, you could say, learning through immersion. We were put in small groups that met several times over the few days. Apart from the start and finishing times for each group meeting, there was only one instruction. To study the interactions in the group. I could not think what on earth this meant! . . . So, I just let myself join in the discussion as best I could, sometimes speaking and sometimes just listening to others. The first learning moment came when, following an intervention from the group facilitator, we were led to listen to the silent member. Who startled us by saying that we had not listened to him! As we got our protestations out of the way, and calmed down enough for him to tell his story, we realised that what he said was true. Three times in the last couple of sessions he had said something about feeling low and we had ignored him . . . ! On its own, that would not, I think, have changed anything much. But as we explored our experience more, we realised that what had driven our ignoring him was our reluctance to hear and face his feeling low. This was why we had effectively excluded him from the group. It's what groups often do. This created a new situation - now, we wanted to know more and when he spoke, we listened with intense attention. And found ourselves moved. Slowly, other

group members shared things they had thought or felt but chosen not to say . . . You can imagine how this changed the atmosphere and the relationships in the group. We now talked in a very different way: we listened to each other, and close bonds of understanding formed between us.

Pondering on today's readings and conscious that this was my first time with you all, I remembered one member of the All Saints congregation telling me what she looked for when a priest new to her was celebrating. "Does she do it from the heart?" That's the challenge isn't it? The link between today's readings and my two stories is the promise that the Lord declared through the prophets; to give his people "a new heart" to replace their hearts of stone. The resurrection of our Lord is the fulfilment of that promise. Pardon?! You may say. But yes and this is why I say that.

The gift of new life that God gives to his people, the fruit of all the giving that our Lord referred to in the Gospel reading, is shown in new ways of seeing the world and all that is in it. Often we experience this in encounters with others. So the apostles came to know their Lord was risen in meeting him, along with their companions. Through these encounters, they saw and came to understand Jesus and his teaching in a completely new way. Their fear of earthly powers, including death, their shame and guilt at having abandoned him, was changed through these encounters. There was a process of remembering and sharing together through which they remembered their recent past in new ways, realising how many things they had misunderstood. But in today's reading from Acts, they still have some way to go. "they asked him, Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" So, the process of changing how they see and understand is underway. In the weeks to come we shall hear how the process continues and changes them even more.

When the silent member of that small group described his experience of not being heard, he too opened a new way for us relate to each other. Not just by showing us how we had excluded him but by not holding that against us and going on to share his story. Which opened the way for all of us to do the same . . . Our hearts of stone were replaced by new hearts that were open to each other. There was both laughter and tears and we were energised. Later in an open reflection session we heard our facilitator say the group had known joy, and we realised that was true.

For this and for all good things we give all credit and our thanks to God the Holy Trinity. May we live and love in God's joyful dance. Amen.