

So, is this Sunday properly called Low Sunday, is that just unfair?

In our two readings we have heard from towards the end of John's gospel, so towards the end of Jesus's life and ministry, and we have also had the first of a series of readings we have over the next few weeks from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, telling us about the early church. So what did those readings include – and I will start with the second of those readings as it happened in history first, that being the reading from John.

First, we have Jesus' first appearance to the disciples. Surely that happening must have been a wonderfully uplifting, and re-assuring moment for the disciples.

Second, we have the whole Doubting Thomas story, which in the end is a real commitment to belief by Thomas.

Third, we get this lovely passage about the purpose of John's gospel.

Fourth, and finally, we have our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, which is all about how a church should operate – or perhaps it's not as simple as that.

Let's look at each in turn.

First, Jesus appearing to the disciples. This passage immediately follows Jesus' resurrection and his appearance to Mary Magdalene, who has gone off to tell the disciples that, "I have seen the Lord." It is now the evening on the first day of the week and the disciples are sitting in a locked room, I would imagine, scared stiff. The might of the Jewish Authorities had killed Jesus, and this group were well known as Jesus' disciples, and they must surely have been sitting thinking, "We are next." And Jesus appears in the middle of this locked room and says, "Peace be with you." These are the words that we say to each other at communion – I wonder if you had ever really considered what they mean? They were in fact an every day eastern greeting, not meaning something like, "may you be saved from trouble" but more like, "May God give you every good thing".

Jesus then goes on to say, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." I'm not really sure that these would be the most reassuring words the disciples could hear. They knew that the Father was God, and God had sent Jesus to his death, so now he was sending them to their deaths? Surely not. I'm pretty sure that by this stage, even in their state of panic, these disciples must have got used to the unexpected, and this was surely another of those situations.

The best way I have heard of understanding what is going on is to consider the difference between achieving something and implementing that same something.

A composer can achieve the creation of a masterful piece of music, but until the orchestra implements that music by playing it the job is not complete. A clockmaker can design and build the most beautiful, intricate clock, but until the new owner puts a battery in or winds it up, and sets the time correctly, is the clock of any real use. Jesus has accomplished the defeat of death, and has begun the work of new creation, by his death and resurrection – that is his achievement, and the disciples don't have to do that all over again – but they do have to implement the new creation by starting the church that Jesus charged them, and especially Peter, to do. And, of course, it is our job to continue that implantation.

And thankfully, we don't have to do that alone. "Receive the Holy Spirit", says Jesus. There's another of those links to the Old Testament here by the way. We are told that Jesus breathed on the disciples. When we are told in Genesis that God created man, we are told that God breathed into the nostrils of

the man he had made from dust and the man became a living being. And again when God was working through the prophet Ezekiel in bringing life to the dry bones in the valley of the dry bones, we find this:

“Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” “

Jesus is now breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples to make them the implementers that he requires. In the same way we are promised that God will breathe the Holy Spirit into us in order to make us the implementers of his church.

So second, dear old Thomas. To have been one of Jesus’ first twelve disciples and to be known as ‘Doubting Thomas’ is a bit tough on the man really isn’t it? And, as I suspect you or I may have done, having heard this seemingly bizarre tale of his former leader, who had been killed, returning to them alive, he said, “I want proof”. And a week later he got it. And Jesus was so gentle. No lecture. No criticism. Just, “Here is your proof”. And then there is the line that applies completely to us today.

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Aren’t they the words of encouragement that we really need as we try and build his church in our 4 villages? Nobody here today will have seen the physical reality that was Jesus – yet through learning about him from the bible, we believe in him. And because of that we are described as blessed. That, I think, is really rather wonderful.

But perhaps the most important part of the Thomas story is what Thomas said to Jesus when he did see him. “My Lord and My God.” We get to almost the end of the book of John and someone, for the first time, calls Jesus, God. And the significance of that in John’s gospel is how it maps against the opening of the gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”.

The Word was Jesus who was there in the beginning. And then we get the whole story of Jesus’ life and ministry, and after his death and resurrection it is Thomas who then gets the big opportunity to say that Jesus is God!

Third, the last two verses of our gospel reading, described in My New Revised Standard Version as, “The purpose of this book”.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Jesus’ ministry lasted 3 years, and you get the feeling from each of the 4 gospels written, that it was pretty much continuous. We don’t hear any references to a 2 week break here or there do we? And because of that we can only get the highlights of what happened in those three years. But the ones that are written, as I have said several times during this run through Jesus’ life and ministry, are there so that you will come to believe. But what we must also remember is that just because something is not included in the gospels, it doesn’t mean to say it can’t happen – all we have is that list of highlights.

A quick aside, though. For the second week running I am going to mention uncertainty about the end of a gospel. I don’t know what you think but those two verses sounded to me like the conclusion of a book.

But then there is another chapter – almost starting the story again. Speculation is that this chapter was written later, perhaps at the end of the author’s life, and was written due to a misunderstanding of something that Jesus said to Peter along the lines of Jesus will not return until the last disciple has died,

and the rumour was that the last disciple was John, so John, or someone on his behalf then wrote this last chapter perhaps as a more informative conclusion of the gospel. But we don't really know – it just reads a little oddly.

And finally, our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. I'm not going to go into this in much detail today, because I am hoping we may get the opportunity to run a sermon series on how what happens in Acts teaches us how to build our church today later in the year, but a couple of points for today.

First, I don't believe this passage was then, or is now, meant to be taken literally. There were complicated rules laid down in the Torah – that is the first 5 books of the Old Testament as we know them now – about the forgiveness of sins and debts and the jubilee, every 7 years, where property is returned to the original owner, and how that all fits in with how these early Christians were trying to live their lives is, to me at least, incredibly confusing and complicated. What is more, when Paul went on his missionary journeys, he made it clear that he relied for accommodation on people who owned their own houses, and so how that fits in with passage is even more confusing. So let's not worry today about the practicalities of this passage.

But second, what this is all about, is that implementation I was talking about earlier of God's church after Jesus left the disciples. And what is key is that the followers were working completely together. They were making sure that none of their community were left without what they needed, and also that when money was required to fund what they were doing, that was made available by the community. And those two key messages apply as much today as they did then. We, as a church need to support those in our community that need support, and we need to make sure that our church has the resources it needs to do its work.

So 4 short passages which together build up to a real way forward for us as Christians. First there was the need for total belief in Jesus, the risen Jesus, and the knowledge that whatever we are called to do, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to help us. Second, the belief in Jesus who we have not seen means we are blessed by God – and that Jesus and God are one. Third, that so much happened in Jesus' ministry which is not recorded. What John gives us is enough so that might believe in Jesus. And then our brief dip into Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles into the early church, which shows us the importance of being church together and supporting each other in that work.

I am hoping that later in the year we will be able to build on this sort of investigation into the life and ministry of Jesus to put together a plan for the next few years to really build the church in our 4 villages.

We are all too well aware of the short-term challenges that we face, but do we have an idea as to how we meet those challenges, and overcome the other obstacles that are in the way of growing our church. We need the right combination of reading our bibles, prayer, constructive thinking and organisation and leadership to create a church that in these 4 villages has a real future, an exciting future, and a future we, and many others, will want to be a part of. And what better time is there than just after the celebration of the rising from death of our saviour, to start to consider that. Sorry, but Low Sunday is the wrong name for this Sunday.

Amen