

Puy de Serre Easter 4 2018

Acts 4 5-12; 1 Jn 3 16 end; Jn 10 11-18

‘This is the Word of the Lord’. We say it whenever we read from the Bible in church but what does it mean to us? A friend of mine has taken to asking a question instead of the usual formula. ‘How is this the Word of the Lord to you today?’ By doing this he recognises that the Holy Spirit works in us as we listen to the reading and reveals to us new truths as we travel on our Christian journey. It is particularly important that we allow the Spirit to do this when we hear texts like our gospel reading today which are familiar.

So this morning I will try to share with you how our three readings have spoken to me as I have thought and prayed about them this week. It may be that they will speak to you differently, but the important thing is that they should speak.

Our gospel reading is an old favourite. Jesus the Good Shepherd whom we will have seen represented in Victorian stained glass windows, holding a little lamb in His arms. Though fans of Country File may have seen a lovely picture of the Good Shepherd in Adam who took the bag from over a new born lam’s head as it was preventing it from breathing, wiped it down with some straw and introduced it to its mother. But there is so much more to Jesus’ claim than that. By saying ‘I am’ He is inviting people to see His divinity, using the name of God applied to Himself. Then He is claiming to know His sheep, each and every one of them – that is all of us - and to lay down His life for us willingly.

At the time the disciples didn’t know what Jesus was speaking about only after the Crucifixion and Resurrection would it all make sense.

What a difference a few weeks can make. On Good Friday the disciples were terrified and defeated. Jesus was dead and all their hopes appeared to have been dashed for ever. Slowly from Easter Sunday onwards more and more of them met with the Risen Jesus. Mary on the first Easter morning, most beautifully, recognised Him when He called her name and sent her to tell the other disciples the good news that, in spite of all, He was alive. To the disciples

on the Emmaus road He explained the scriptures whilst their hearts burned within them and then made Himself known to them through the breaking of the bread. To the other disciples, though they huddled away in fear behind locked doors, He appeared, spoke His Peace, sent them to continue His work and breathed upon them the Holy Spirit. In Luke's gospel He tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Spirit – 'power from on high.' They watch Him ascend into heaven and are told by angels that one day He will come again. On the Day of Pentecost the promised Spirit comes and suddenly their fear has gone. They are out in the streets preaching about Jesus whom the Jewish leaders killed but whom they know, because they have seen Him, is alive. Peter and John heal a lame man at the Beautiful Gate in the name of Jesus and are preaching about Him again when the authorities come and arrest them, keeping them in custody overnight.

The next day – where our reading from Acts begins – they find themselves in the same situation, standing before the same leaders, as Jesus did after His arrest and before His crucifixion. But now their fears are gone. They see through the trick question, designed to make them guilty of blasphemy – 'by what power or by what name did you do this' – and preach to them in the power of the Holy Spirit. The man was healed in the name of Jesus whom they crucified but whom God raised from the dead. Quoting Ps 118 they say that though He was rejected He has become the cornerstone of faith. He only is God's means of salvation.

This is a staggering claim in any context, but especially in the one in which they find themselves, before the High Priest and the elders. They are claiming more authority for Jesus than He did Himself when He was alive – Jesus is God's only means of salvation - and they know that it's true, because they've seen Him, risen from the dead. No wonder thousands flock to join them.

He is saying that God loves us and knows us by name, that God gives His life for us destroying the power of sin, including ours, and, following His resurrection, we too, like the disciples, can hear Him calling us by name, receive His peace, recognise Him in the breaking of the bread, know that He calls us to share His

good news with others and receive the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do so.

In our epistle reading John tells us that our discipleship, to be authentic and powerfully convincing, must be based on belief in Jesus as the Son of God who teaches us that God loves and forgives us and enables us to have love for one another. God is love and those who live in God live in love and God lives in them, as he will write later on in the same epistle. Christians are those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God and love and serve others because they know God loves them.

We are living in the West through a period of drastic decline in the Christian church and many both seek to explain why this should be and to find new ways of being church which will attract younger people. But the gospel message and Jesus Himself remain the same and where it is preached and lived out by his disciples the kingdom of God continues to grow.

The problem, I believe is that it isn't happening enough.

What do people, and their numbers are growing rapidly in the West, who know little or nothing about the Christian faith and what we believe, see when they look at the church and the way it organises itself? Leaders who abuse children and then are protected by the institution from the consequences of their crimes, people who fall out about their views of sexuality, the role of women, different interpretations of theology or ways of worship, to name but a few. What do they see and experience when they have dealings with us? Do our words and actions reveal to them with power that Jesus is the Risen Son of God who alone gives salvation? What would they think if they were dropped into a PCC meeting to observe, like a fly on the wall, what much of our time and energies are devoted to? What would they make of our fallings out and worries over things great and small? How often do we take the opportunity to tell people outside our church walls that we believe in Jesus Christ who died for our and for their sins, and is alive today and living in us in the power of His Holy Spirit and that Jesus is the one who saves us from sin and death. Are the fruits of the Spirit so visible in our lives that people when they meet with us, meet with Him?

I am not saying these things to make you or myself feel guilty but to invite us all to allow the Holy Spirit to refocus our attention where that needs to happen, so that we, like those early disciples, can speak with an authentic voice, not only in word but also through our deeds, to share the love, the forgiveness and the victory and the promises of Jesus with others. To tell them that though we are no better than them we know that there is love and forgiveness and life in all its abundance in Jesus. Like beggars, sometimes miserable beggars we have found out where there is food and hope and are willing to share them.

Just after our reading in Acts we read that the crowd 'took notice of Peter and John' that they had been with Jesus. May we meet with Him again this morning and may those we meet when we leave this place and go our separate ways take note of us and experience the Risen Jesus through us. Amen