

“AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME”

John 20:19-23

The keen student of the church year may well be a little bewildered by the choice of Bible reading today. After all, we're only a week or so after Christmas, and here we are with a reading from the Easter story. What's going on? Well, as a new year begins for us – and particularly for us as a church – I felt drawn to this episode from the life of Jesus as it marks a new beginning for his followers. This morning is the first time we have met together as a congregation in 2004 and we are, I hope, looking forward to all the good things God has in store for us in the year ahead, to all the challenges and opportunities that come with the amazing privilege of being God's people here at the heart of this city. It will be a significant year for us as we finally get started on the redevelopment project – in just two weeks' time, as it happens. In a few minutes we will join together as a community of God's people to recommit ourselves to him for the year ahead. It is a special time for us.

And for the disciples whom we have just read about it was a significant time too. They too were facing a new start. The time they had spent with Jesus was rapidly drawing to a close – although they were, as yet, unaware of that. The ordeal of the crucifixion and the sense of loss and betrayal were behind them. Jesus was back from the dead and the mission to proclaim and demonstrate the good news of the Kingdom of God was about to start in earnest. They were to be endowed with resurrection power and start to transform the world. It was, indeed, a new beginning.

And as they are about to embark upon this new phase of ministry, Jesus appears in order to equip them for the task ahead of them. At the point we join the story, the disciples are still afraid and unaware of the consequences of the news – which they have only partially taken in – that Jesus is alive again. They are meeting behind locked doors, scared that their association with Jesus may cause them difficulty with the other Jews. They cannot see the future and are naturally apprehensive about what might happen. It's a bit like us. We always seem to pause – perhaps rather arbitrarily – at the beginning of a new year to peer into the next twelve months and try to work out what might happen. There's sense of apprehension and a sense of excitement at what God might have in store for us. And it's important at such a point that we recognise the presence of Jesus and receive what he has to offer us in terms of reassurance and challenge. That's what happens with these disciples – and it provides us with a kind of template for our own preparation for 2004. How does Jesus prepare his followers for the way ahead?

1. HE REMINDS THEM

Through the apparently securely locked doors, the practical expression of their fear and apprehension, comes Jesus – quietly and very matter-of-factly. He greets them quite naturally with the standard greeting – “*Shalom*” : “*Peace be with you*”. And we believe he is here with us this morning as we peer into the mists of the new year, unsure how things are going to turn out and even a bit fearful of what might take place in our lives between now and next Christmas.

And as he stands there in the middle of them, he holds out his hands and hitches up his cloak to show them his side – the festering scars of the nails and spear which will be the eternal reminders of his sacrificial death on the cross of Golgotha. Partly, no doubt, he is wanting to confirm in their minds that it's actually him, that the events of the past few days have not been a dream. Of course, there wouldn't have been many other people who could have entered the room silently through a locked door – but just to be on the safe side, there's now this proof that it's really him.

As well as that, though, I'd like to suggest that he is reminding them of the sacrifice which he has made. These scars are the signs of his suffering and death, the reminders that he went to the cross and died there, bearing in his body the weight of the sins of the world. This is a graphic reminder of his death on their

behalf, of his struggle with the cosmic forces of evil, of his victory over the power of sin – and the fact that he is able to stand there alive and show them that is also a tangible witness to his resurrection, to his victory not only over sin, but over death – the two greatest threats to humanity’s enjoyment of God’s plan for them have been disposed of. It’s the heart of the gospel. Everything else these disciples will do and be is dependent on this one thing – Jesus died for our salvation and rose again to give us hope for the eternal future.

And it’s where we must start – and restart and restart again. We need constantly to be reminding ourselves of what is at the heart of our mission, what is the core of our gospel. It is so easy to find ourselves caught up in projects and programmes, to spend our time in meetings and on committees, discussing and debating. We will pledge ourselves again this morning to working for God and to doing his will here in Lichfield and the surrounding area. But why? What’s the point? What are we doing all this for? Well, Jesus reminds us of the **why** as he holds out before us his nail scarred hands, as he offers us a glimpse of his pierced side. We are doing this because Jesus, God’s Son, left the glory and splendour of heaven to come into this world and live and die and live again so that we might have peace with God, so that we might enjoy the relationship with him that was planned for eternity but perverted by sin. If we do not keep that at the centre of our thoughts, at the heart of our vision, then we will never be wholly successful in carrying out the mission that God has for us. We must remind ourselves again and again – in reading the Bible, in receiving communion, in sharing with one another – that the whole point of our life together as followers of Jesus is to respond in obedient service to his awesome and sacrificial love.

2. HE COMMISSIONS THEM

But, wonderful as the experience of salvation may be for us, we cannot keep it to ourselves. And the disciples enjoyment of the presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ cannot remain stuck in that room for ever – wonderful as it might seem to them. Instead, Jesus commissions them to go out. He sends them out – “*as the Father has sent [him]*”. We’ve had the **why** of their mission: this is the **what** – this is the task that is set for those who claim to be followers of Jesus.

Although it’s made very clear that they cannot stay where they are, that they need to go out, the exact details of that mission are not spelled out here, other than in the phrase, “*as the Father has sent me*”. What was it that Jesus was sent to do? What was *his* mission? In that we will find a clue as to our mission – and in other places Jesus is actually explicit in his definition of what he was sent to do.

“To seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10)

Jesus came to seek out those whose lives had lost meaning, who were “*harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd*”, those who found themselves so mired in the consequences of their own – and other people’s – wrong choices that they had lost the spark of real humanity that God had intended for them. Jesus spoke those words in the context of the story of Zacchaeus, a man who materially and financially had everything. He was successful at what he did. He lived well and was comfortable. But he had left out of his thinking his fellow citizens and his God. Jesus opened his eyes and restored to him a sense of community and a sense of spirituality. Zacchaeus was one of those whom Jesus found and restored.

Our community today is as full of people with Zacchaeus’ problems as was the community of Jesus’ day. And we are sent, like him, to reach out to them, to help them rediscover a sense of dignity, to help them recover their lost humanity and to point them to Jesus in whom alone we can live life to the full. Whatever programmes we may be planning for our new buildings, whatever events and outreaches we conceive for the new year, whatever expressions of our Christian identity we may be wanting to bring to reality here at the heart of this city, the bottom line is that we are to seek and save the lost, to make it clear that real meaning, real hope, real forgiveness is found only in Jesus. Anything else can be done by Social Services and the Department of Health of Education.

“To serve” (Matthew 20:28)

Jesus, King of Glory, Prince of Peace, Lord of lords and King of kings, was sent into our world by his Father to serve. He did not come to attract to himself adulation and worship. He was not interested in fame and fortune – that was made clear when he faced the devil out in the wilderness. And, though his followers (as we have seen recently in our studies in Mark’s gospel) couldn’t quite grasp that fame and worldly power were not on the agenda, Jesus made it very clear that those who followed him with integrity and authenticity were to be servants. The people of his day had had enough of the religious leaders lording it over them: they were tired of finding themselves oppressed by those who pursued their own power-hungry agendas under a veneer of spirituality. Jesus came to show the alternative, to be the “Servant-King”, to model meekness and majesty.

And so are we. Sent out as the Father has sent Jesus, we are to serve each other and to serve this community. It may not always be appreciated. It may be misinterpreted. It may be abused. But our calling is to be not only servants of Jesus Christ, but servants of the world, in the sense that we are not afraid to get our hands dirty. It is as we love one another and love those around us with the authentic love of Christ that we will begin to see transformation of this city.

“To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:19)

This was the climax of Jesus’ “Nazareth Manifesto” as he set out before the worshippers at the synagogue in his home town the vision of his mission. He took the words of the prophet Isaiah (*Isaiah 61*) and applied them to his own mission. He was sent – again, as we have seen so clearly in Mark’s gospel – to offer an alternative to the agendas of men and women who had been hoodwinked into believing that life consisted of feathering your own nest and sticking to sets of rules and regulations in the hope of eventually getting into heaven. His agenda – of transformation, of love, of freedom, of certain hope – was not only preached and taught in his persuasive words and stunning parables, but demonstrated in his healing, his confronting of the forces of evil, his restoration of dignity and humanity to the outcast and disenfranchised. It was a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

The disciples continued that mission as they began to move out from Jerusalem into the wider world. Luke tells the story of that initial expansion in *Acts* and down through the succeeding centuries the followers of Jesus have kept at it. Today, in 2004, we are called, commissioned to continue that. In our words, our worship, our work, our witness we “*proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour*”, we continue to give glimpses of the Kingdom of God. Yes, we are to preach the word here and wherever we have opportunity. Yes, we are to speak of Jesus in our conversations and to tell of his goodness in all that we say. But we are also called to live it out, to model it, to show here just what the kingdom of God might look like as we seek, save and serve this community.

It’s an awesome task and a tremendous privilege to follow in the steps of our Master in this way. But it’s also an unavoidable task if we really do take seriously the things Jesus says. We cannot claim to be his followers if we are not following him. We cannot claim to be “*Christ*”ians if we do not model the characteristics of Christ in our own lives and in our own congregation. We cannot claim to be the Church, the Body of Christ, if we do not accept the commission that he himself has given to be his hands, his feet, his voice here in this community.

3. HE EMPOWERS THEM

We’ve seen the **why** and the **what** of this mission. But **how** on earth are we to accomplish it? Those first disciples were scared out of their wits by what had gone on in the previous few days. They were meeting behind locked doors. And even before that they were not particularly confident and able representatives

of the Saviour of the World. But Jesus leans over them, breathes on them and invites them to “*receive the Holy Spirit*”. He empowers them with his own Spirit. I don’t want to get sidetracked into essentially pointless debates about whether they got the Holy Spirit here or on the Day of Pentecost. The important thing is that they received the Holy Spirit and their mission was transformed in every way. The poor, unschooled, ineffective, frightened band of fishermen, customs officials, tradesmen and terrorists became a group of men that changed the world for ever. They were emboldened, equipped, empowered by this Holy Spirit in a way that was beyond their imaginings – and the legacy of their transformation is still with us today.

As is the promise of the Holy Spirit. I am not one of those who believes that the empowering work of the Holy Spirit somehow died out with the first apostles. Even those of us who may well believe on an intellectual level that the Holy Spirit is still active often deny that by our reluctance to allow him to work within our lives. If we really do want to be the people that I believe God calls us to be here in Lichfield and the surrounding area, if we really do believe that God has called us to be a church at the heart of this city, serving and seeking and saving – then we need to be anointed with that same Holy Spirit that empowered those first disciples.

In a few minutes time we will pray that God will envision us “*by the power of the Holy Spirit*”. We will ask God to “*pour down his Spirit*” on us. We will pray for the “*help of the Holy Spirit*”. When you say those words, will you believe it can happen? Will you believe that God will do something special amongst us this morning, this year that will prove his ability to empower us supernaturally for the task ahead? That may be uncomfortable for us; it may even be inconvenient for us. But I believe God can do great things through us here this year – and he can start to do it this morning. Are you up for that?

In the hymn we’re about to sing – Harry Emerson Fosdick’s wonderful and challenging *God of grace and God of glory* (MP192) – we ask that God will “*pour his power*” on his people. Believe it as you sing it! We pray that God will “*Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore*”. This world does not have to be this way. And we have been sent by Jesus, as he was sent by the Father, to proclaim that truth in words, actions and attitudes. God, “*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage*” and pour out your Holy Spirit on us, we pray. 2004 is going to be a significant year. None of us will ever forget it. Let’s pray that God will equip us for it!