

IS SEEING, BELIEVING?

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 4th May 2003

Luke 24: 35 – 48: “Is seeing, believing?”

Some, perhaps many, wish that we could have seen the miracles of Jesus with our own eyes, or touched him with our own hands. Perhaps it would have been easier to believe, if we had?

Today’s Gospel account of Luke’s emphasises the physical nature of the risen Jesus. It follows the Emmaus Road incident from last week’s Gospel reading (which visiting preacher David Jenkins highlighted for us). At the house in Emmaus, Jesus breaks bread, but does not eat. This time, he both asks for food and eats it before their eyes. It reinforces his invitation: “Handle me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have”!

Luke emphasises that the risen Christ is NOT a disembodied spirit – nor even a spiritual person set free from his wretched human body. He also emphasises that Jesus’ suffering and resurrection were revealed beforehand in the very scriptures that were read in the synagogue day by day.

We are not able to see these things for ourselves – at least not in the same way that the disciples did. Even though we understand that Jesus is very much alive and still doing things in our midst, we don’t see him in the flesh in the same way that the apostles did.

These weeks after Easter are called the Season of Easter. They lead to the celebration of Pentecost - the occasion of the outpouring of the Spirit of God in a spectacular way not known before. In these weeks, we are presented with eyewitness accounts of what Jesus said and did, and of who he really is.

We are seeing Jesus through others’ eyes, much like a court of law might do so, through the accounts of witnesses. However, a court of law often has to distinguish between several different and competing versions of an event, or interpretations of an event, each presented as “the truth and nothing but...!”

In the case of the apostles and the early eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, this is not so. There is an almost unbelievable unanimity – even though they may view things with different perspectives – but there’s a unanimity regarding the facts of Jesus’ resurrection.

Jesus appeared firsthand to his apostles, and later to hundreds of other disciples, and it is of this that they write, to give assurance to later generations who would not be eyewitnesses.

But we forget that there were many responses and experiences that occurred before this: The scattering and running away from Jesus before his crucifixion, the fear and disappointment – which probably made Thomas run away and stay away from the

others, in his grief and uncertainty over what had happened, struggling to understand it all.

It is encouraging to note that Jesus comfortably made allowances for Thomas, who simply could not believe what others had told him, until he experienced the wounds of Jesus for himself in a personal encounter with him.

I find that a great encouragement to all people of faith, who from time to time will have questions that challenge their faith – including some that remain unanswered. In Julia's sermon on Good Friday, focussing on Jesus' agony of desolation on the cross, we were also reminded that our faith uniquely makes allowances for paradox and for struggles of faith – because it is a faith rooted in the reality of physical life, not in some unreal spiritual world.

To return to the eyewitness testimony: What is the point of all this?

The climax of it is that we may believe.

John puts it so very well in his account (**John 20: 30-31**).

What is it, to believe?

As most of you probably have known for a very long time, it never means simply an intellectual acceptance of the fact of Jesus' existence. It is said that even Satan has such a belief!

The Greek word used always carries with it two points, not conveyed in the current use of the English word "to believe". It implies BOTH commitment AND action based upon that.

It is more than simply a "head thing" but something into which we would be prepared to put our whole being, something to which we would commit ourselves. That implies the second part, which is the action of following; of putting into practice that which we believe with our hearts and minds and souls.

Although communism has largely faded from the world, it was often said of communists that they displayed the sort of "faith" which many Christians lacked. Once committed to the ideals of communism, they often sacrificed an enormous amount in terms of time, energy and dedication to their cause. It was not enough simply to say, "I am a communist" and then sit back. There was work to be done!

In Christian terms, the word **discipleship** probably sums it up best: to be one who follows in the way of Christ, or who walks by putting his or her feet in the footsteps of Christ. All our worship and preaching and teaching, all the courses on theology – at theological college or Alpha, on basics of prayer or on deepening prayer – are designed around discipleship: to help in drawing us closer to God, and to enable us to walk in the footsteps of Christ, using head and heart and soul. That is a tall order – and is daunting for many, hence sometimes abandoned or not begun, sadly.

As Christians, we are “People of the Resurrection”. We are called to live in the light of the resurrection of Christ (light – being both figurative and literal). We have all the beautiful symbolism at the early morning Easter service of light dispelling darkness – and the challenge to live in the light of that – in other words, to pattern our lives after our belief.

In the next weeks, we will continue to examine our faith in the light of the resurrection, and also once again to explore some further aspects of discipleship – perhaps to learn new things, perhaps to be reminded of that which we already know, but always to be encouraged to live as People of the Resurrection.

But that first requires that we come in person to the Risen Christ, in awe like the first disciples, or even like “doubting Thomas”, that ultimately we may stand again before Christ and say with a similar sense of awe: “My Lord, and My God!”