

“Seeing and Believing”

A Sermon at Union Chapel

23 April 2006

Readings: Ps. 133
Acts 4:32–35 John 20:19–31

- 1:1 It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; our theme is the Word which gives life.
- 1:2 This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our testimony; we declare to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made visible to us.
- 1:3 It is this which we have seen and heard that we may declare to you also, in order that you may share with us in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:1–3

A strange time, this, after the resurrection. We are tempted to think of it like Hollywood: the tidy narrative which dips through the low point of the crucifixion, only to end up, once more, at the high point of the resurrection. Everything neatly divided into before and after, with things after the resurrection the same as they were before the crucifixion. But things are stranger than that.

It's clear fairly soon, when we start reading the resurrection stories, that things afterwards weren't exactly the same as they were before. The disciples seem to find it strangely difficult to recognise Jesus: just earlier in this chapter, in fact, Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a *gardener* (and she was someone who seems to have known Jesus well). In Luke's gospel, two of the disciples, on a fairly long journey, are accompanied by a stranger, who they only recognise when they are eating. Impossible to make sense of this on the Hollywood model (“Gosh, Jesus, it's you! Sorry we didn't recognise you, but that big halo got in the way”). And there is the way that Jesus simply comes and goes, without explanation but also, seemingly, without fuss: he is simply there. Without thunder, without unearthly radiance, just simply there. And, later, simply not there.

And it gets no stranger than in John's gospel, the most meditative of the gospels, the one most focussed on the inner meaning of events. This is the

gospel which accompanies each of the miracles by a long, careful speech by Jesus, setting out the meaning of what has happened – in fact, here the miracles are not called miracles, but *signs*. This is the gospel which does strange things with time: almost half of it is devoted to the Easter events, and it even puts the Last Supper on a different day from the other three (and which probably had theological reasons for doing so).

Jesus breathes on the disciples, and says “Receive the Holy Spirit”. There are resonances in this: at the creation of the world, God breathed life into the man and woman that he had formed from clay. So too with Jesus: he is creating his disciples again, filling them with the Spirit, preparing them to be sent out into the world. What happened at the beginning of the world is repeated, now, when the world is made new.

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with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own
hands; our theme is the Word which gives life.

And so we get a paradoxical combination of the eternal with the very down-to-earth details of the disciples’ life with Jesus. The eternal is what was there from the beginning – before the creation of the world, even – the Word which gives life, the Word which God spoke to himself before the creation. The author of this letter refers to the word as “it”, insisting, maybe, that he’s not just speaking of some bloke. But the miracle, the absolutely astounding thing, is that the eternal Word has lived among us: that the disciples have seen it (with their *own* eyes), that they have even felt it (“with their hands”). And this is the theme, both of the gospel, and of John’s letters: the birth of the eternal Word in time. It is this – the mere presence of the Word among us – which is the important thing, which lies behind all of the signs and wonders. But, also, it lies behind the way that Jesus was, his everyday presence with the people he knew: remember that when the disciples recognise Jesus after the resurrection, they recognise him as he is doing very ordinary things.

So, Thomas. It’s easy to caricature him, easy to make his doubt, his wanting to see and touch, into some sort of secret sin. But all of the disciples – not just Thomas – had trouble believing the resurrection: none of them simply believed it when told. And, in one Gospel or the other, Jesus does quite a lot of telling off of the disciples: sometimes all of them, sometimes just Thomas. So Thomas is not unique in that. And it could be that what he was expressing was not simple, normal doubt, but simply the desire to see and touch: the desire to keep hold of what seemed to be slipping away from him. And, indeed, it was a scary time for the disciples, a time without a clear path to the future and with the past shut off from them.

But in any event what Thomas came to believe is more than even touching Jesus, just touching the man’s body, would have got him to: he says “my Lord and my God”, taking the step from a resurrected human body to the presence of God in Jesus. And there are two things here: of course, you can see that this man has been resurrected. But, more than that, to see that God is present in this man, is going beyond even what Thomas wanted to see: it goes beyond the mere physical presence of the resurrected man. This is what is genuinely hard here, and the disciples (to say nothing of we ourselves) seem not to have been very good at it: they seem to have been, at this turning point of history, somewhat slow to catch on.

The difficult thing, then, is to see God present in Jesus: to see his life – all of his life, not just the miraculous bits – as showing us the way that God is. And it seems to be all of his life that is important here: I think it is no coincidence that so much of what Jesus did with his disciples after the resurrection was to do with eating and drinking, and also, no doubt, the simple pleasures of friendship.

So where does this leave us? We, of course, have not seen Jesus, even just the man, and (to the extent of our faith, modest and fitful as it undoubtedly is) we are in the situation which Jesus was talking of when he said “happy are those who find faith without seeing me”. There is, though, implicitly a purpose here: God did not become a human being and leave it at that. God became a human being in order to show the world what God was like. Jesus, and God in Jesus, had a purpose, then: and, after the resurrection, Jesus sent out the disciples, gave them the Spirit, and left the fledgling church with the task of doing what he had done: of showing the world what God is like, of telling people about God, of somehow being God’s body in the world.

The passage from Acts that we heard shows us a church in the very early stages of doing this, of coming to terms with what they had been sent to do: they have meals together, they care for their members in need, and they hold everything in common. This is the start of the church’s journey: problems (of course) arrive later, and have to be dealt with, and, hopefully, dealt with in the power of the Spirit. But what has changed, between the crucifixion and then, is that the disciples were starting on the mission that Jesus had given them: the very same mission – showing God to the world, telling the world about God – that we too have, and that we, too, with the help of the Holy Spirit, carry forward.

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