

Easter Day Sermon. 4th April 2021. Readings: Acts 10:34-43 John 20:1-18

Let's pray: *Lord Jesus Christ, reveal to us today and everyday your presence in our lives. Amen*

As a new Christian, over a decade ago, I became one of those people who had 'come to faith'.

It is a broad term isn't it because I can look back and recall that I hadn't actually 'arrived' at a point that could call it 'faith', that I had suddenly 'come to', at all! Maybe it should be re worded as 'continually deciding to attend, to grow gradually in faith'. But that does sound a bit long!

All I had 'come to' was that my depression that I had suffered at that time was tipping me over the edge and these thoughts that maybe God exists after all, must merely be a logical response that I would cling to anything that would finally drag me out of it.

I was determined to find a more credible logic to my beginnings of faith than that!

Many do dismiss God in that way especially during any suffering. Many dismiss God completely, during their happiest experiences in life. I know I did, and still do forget his presence.

For many, God can be finally revealed in our desperation and suffering, as well as in our happiness. But it usually happens gradually and like any growing relationship, requires a giving of ourselves.

Deciding to keep coming in faith, to continue to bring all we are into Jesus' ever-lasting resurrection, the ways for us to do so is vast. The most striking and most powerful witness of all about how Jesus is very real, and very present and here today, is through one another.

Early witnesses like Peter and Mary Magdalene in both our readings today, and those who wrote it down. There are differences in the resurrection writings but that does not erode or disprove it. Just as modern-day witnesses, written and verbal, cannot be eroded in their uniqueness, only revealing God's response, through Jesus, to individual needs.

It may seem surprising to some, that Jesus doesn't become instantly loved by us, cared for intimately by us, or be able to create a real heartfelt feeling of emotion within us, overnight, even in his Good Friday suffering.

What trusting relationship can be instantly grown overnight in that way?

Yet, so often having that human trait that if God is real then, in Jesus, we should be able to have him revealed to us dramatically and undeniably. I certainly expected this as proof back then. I did not believe in the resurrection when I was invited to my first Lent group. I didn't feel any of those heartfelt things for Jesus.

Yet belief in the resurrection was, as I was told then, was what the whole Christian faith is built upon. Do you think I wasn't welcome then, after honestly sharing my disbelief? No, I found people who were the opposite. My own expectations to not fit in because I hadn't 'arrived' in faith, was my own ill-conceived presumption and inferiority complex that I had brought with me there.

It was the beginning of a realisation that God can't be duped, or our true selves be hidden from him, which is so freeing and meaningful. Whether we have faith or none, people come to his presence and realise that he has always been there, just as for Peter and Mary. God remaining the same, revealing that it is us who gradually transform, change and grow by faith.

Even if he has been in our lives for many years, through many changes, we have not 'arrived' but are continually 'coming to faith' as servants to what he is calling us to, today. I wasn't expecting a lifelong journey in faith!

It is important then, to listen to people who feel they haven't been accepted and welcomed as Jesus taught us to do.

Jesus reveals this so often throughout the bible, knowing all he met, forgiving and healing, revealing how God can see who we can be, should be, when we can't see it in ourselves, or especially don't want to see such equal acceptance and God's grace towards others, especially those on the margins, who we so often deem not as deserved as ourselves.

Jesus, the very epitome of grace, love, peace, and equality therefore is not an easy inspiration of footsteps to follow.

The Bible does not shy away from the whole human story of what people do, even some using God's name, extremism of religion, suffering, oppression, poverty, inequality. Things that, our world still obviously suffers from today.

John's gospel witness today of Jesus' resurrection, where Mary Magdalene is so full of the pain of grief, after losing her loved one, the man she had grown so close with, would be easier to avoid fully empathising with her in that. It may open old wounds in ourselves. For many over the last year, there has been so much grief and loss, and not being able to be with those loved ones, not even at their end of their bodily life.

To see or feel Jesus as a presence today, residing in our hearts, to begin growing in faith, and continue to do so, we are continually invited to follow, including the pains of Good Friday and Mary's grief, and connecting that to ourselves and to those around us.

So that we can all celebrate the eternal grace, hope, comfort, peace, love, and the joy in the presence of the eternally resurrected Jesus in our lives today, on Easter Day, as Easter people.

As Easter people then, we can be faithful in the knowledge that the body of our loved ones may be out of reach to us physically, yet, have returned in their eternal spiritual journey to the restful care of Jesus Christ.

If we don't enter into the whole journey of who Mary was, what she had been in her past, how she had been saved by Jesus, had been taught God's forgiveness of her past, through Jesus, continued to gain strength through the Holy Spirit, we can miss that connection that we are to ask for and receive the same for ourselves and for others.

As I read about Mary's grief and suffering, in verse 11 where she 'stood weeping outside the empty tomb', I had thoughts of a few people who had burst into tears through loss or struggles in life.

I remembered my own tears when I first sat in the presence of other Christians and asked them to pray for specific personal things in my own life. It is the beginning of experiencing the bravery and freedom of unburdening our weights, that we so often continue carrying around with us.

It is not something that you 'come to' or 'arrive at' instantly and then remain forever rigid, arrived in faith. It continues daily, like it is Easter every day.

Those who were miraculously healed by Jesus experienced real human life afterwards, and all it brings. Jesus helped them begin to carry him around with them in their hearts and minds, armed with the strength as well as the challenging calling of the Holy Spirit.

Because we have shared our spiritual faith journeys throughout life, revealing when Jesus was more prominently present to us, as well as times where we have lost sight of him, we can then, as believers, as witnesses in faith to Jesus' presence in our own lives, now confirm Jesus' resurrected presence now, with us, as Easter people.

Easter Day, today, celebrates that continuing presence, bringing us back to God. Wherever we are. Whoever we are.

In getting to know the ordinary Peter, his past, acceptance to follow, misunderstandings, mistakes, fears, avoidance of Good Friday, to his newfound transformation of confidence in Acts, we see him and ourselves as growing Easter people, sharing together this spiritual, continual, and eternal journey, that continues, even in death.

As Mary, in grief, having to let go of the bodily Jesus Messiah, to not cling to him as being there only for herself and those closest to him, we too can ask, receive, reside in the gift of his presence with us all, together, as Easter people, today, and every day.

Whether we celebrate with chocolate eggs, cards with baby chicks, or cute rabbits on the front, or whether we celebrate today by his cross, in prayer, with 'correct' Easter colours. God is with us.

Let us pray,

Lord, may we see and feel your Happy Easter joy and presence of hope today, in people answering the call of those who suffer, in flowers, in nature, in a smile, in words, even in the chocolate covered mouths of your children, big and small.

Amen