

Sunday 16 April 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Easter 2

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-end

What is it, do you think, that makes people believe?

Perhaps it has never really occurred to you but, I suppose if you drill down into it, those reasons are probably many and various.

Either way, our readings this morning do, at least, give us a few possible answers to that question.

Let's start with the Gospel reading because, here, John gives us two sets of responses.

First of all, there are Jesus' disciples, huddled together, their misery and their fear locking them in far more effectively than the door they think is protecting them from the world outside.

They have heard some rumours, that's to say they have heard what Mary, Peter and the disciple Jesus loved had to say following their visit to the grave. But out of those three, Mary is the only one who claims to have seen the Lord, and even she has to admit that she didn't recognise him at first.

I wonder, if you had been one of Mary, Peter or John, would you, in those circumstances, have fully believed?

But there they are, all together with the exception of Thomas when Jesus appears before them.

Unmistakably Jesus, full of extraordinary and unpredictable life, free to come and go as he pleases, but it is Jesus all the same. And they believe.

Then a week later, and again on a Sunday evening, Jesus appears again but this time Thomas is actually with them.

Thomas, bless him. Thomas is sceptical.

The dour, dogged disciple who had seen the others all excited, elated and unable to contain their joy, he'll trust nobody's evidence but his own.

He's not going to be taken in.

Even his best friends can't convince him... "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." he said.

Thomas set out precisely what, for him, would constitute proof and Jesus gives it to him, uncannily echoing Thomas' exact words.

Only now, Thomas doesn't need to do it, after all.

What he needed was for Jesus to hear and respond, and Thomas believed.

Thomas believed with a ringing statement of personal faith... "My Lord and my God".

In our reading from Acts, the process is much more complicated. Here, Peter is offering his audience a mixture of reasons for believing.

First of all, he is offering them a new way of seeing what they already know to be true.

They have heard about Jesus and about the signs and wonders that he performed among them and they also know what happened to him at the end.

Now Peter shows them, through their own scriptures, that this man they thought dead is actually alive with the life of God.

As further evidence of this Peter offers them himself and the other disciples as eyewitnesses.

'Go on' he urges, 'ask us anything you like'.

But lastly, and most powerfully, Peter offers them a way of acknowledging what they have done. 'You crucified him', Peter tells them.

Who knows how many of the people listening to Peter were themselves present at the crucifixion.

It was, after all, a massive public event and spectacle.

But, present or not, Peter has, quite rightly, sensed a mood of collective guilt. They know that they and their representatives used the ungodly power of Rome to do their dirty work and that Jesus was an innocent victim. Now, they can confess and understand that their unfaithfulness did not derail God's purpose.

Bottom line... they can repent and believe.

Finally, in 1 Peter we, as readers, are offered two reasons for believing. The first is hope and the second is community.

The hope is what brought those readers there in the first place; that wild, ridiculous hope that all this talk about Jesus being resurrected was actually true.

Because if it is true, then perhaps there really is some point to this world, perhaps we're not born simply to suffer and to die, but are actually active participants in the kingdom of God.

And having accepted the hope, have stepped into a community of others who have also thrown caution to the wind and decided to live as though life matters.

All of them, together, will hold on to that hope, whatever the opposition, and when one feels like giving up, the others will remind them why they are there. A perfect template for being church, in fact.

So the reasons for believing are many and various, and all of them will, at various times, appear completely ridiculous to others and maybe even sometimes to ourselves.

One man's proof is another man's sneer.

I guess, most of the readers of John's Gospel can sympathise with Thomas. They have heard about Jesus, but not seen him alive for themselves. They must depend on what the witnesses say, and then take a step of faith.

In the end, we hear Jesus give what feels like a gentle rebuke to Thomas... "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." he said. However, I don't see this so much as a rebuke to Thomas, but more of an encouragement to all those of us who have come later.

God in his graciousness may well meet you at the point at which you think you need proof in order to believe, just as he did with Thomas. But then he will give you himself, and after that, you will need nothing more.

The scar bearer has declared that we who believe are blessed. We are blessed indeed.

Amen.