

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8AM SERVICE OF HOLY COMMUNION
ON 20 APRIL 2008, THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

BEING EASTER PEOPLE - 'BEARING THE WOUNDS OF CHRIST'¹

Acts 7:55-end; John 14:1-14

“ ... the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do ... “

Over the past three weeks we've been exploring what it means to be an Easter people:

- In week 1, Adela spoke about our confidence in the Resurrection – why it's rational and necessary for us Christians to believe in it.
- In the second week, I talked about our responsibility to proclaim the Resurrection – in words sometimes, but always in the quality of our lives.
- Last week, Nick used the sermon slot to give us an opportunity to listen in silence to the voice of the risen Christ.
- And now this week I want to talk about what it means when we say that we bear the wounds of Christ.

Or perhaps those aren't words that we would use – they sound a bit scary and seem to echo that grim glorification of suffering for its own sake that we find in some strands of Catholic spirituality and in the British public school – the mortification of the flesh through self-flagellation, the cold baths – “take it like a man – it'll do you good”.

Well, you'll be relieved to know I'm not talking about that – pointless suffering is I think always pointless, a bad thing - and seeking it out seems to me to reek of a self-loathing that has nothing to do with our belief that each of us is a beloved child of God. But we cannot escape the fact that our calling does involve us not only in joy, but also in pain and in sorrow.

And the joy and the pain, the agony and the ecstasy, are not always separable. It is as Stephen, the first martyr, joyfully proclaims his vision of Christ at God's right hand that the crowd cover their ears and pick up their stones. And from its earliest days the church has held in honour those like Stephen who have died for their faith – not because their deaths are an impressive gesture, but because they witness to Christ – indeed 'martyr' means 'witness'. And in one way or another each martyrdom follows the example of Christ loving to the end – “Father, forgive them”², prays Jesus - and Stephen echoes – “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

My one problem with our lovely reredos screen is that the figure of Jesus in the centre has undamaged hands. The resurrected Christ still bore his scars, and indeed Thomas was invited to touch them. When Christ sits in judgement, or rather as we judge ourselves against the model of his perfection, surely he holds up his wounded hands. The body in which we share in this Eucharist is the wounded body of Christ. As we sing in Charles Wesley's great hymn describing Christ's Second Coming:

¹ This sermon is the fourth in our post-Easter series, “Being Easter People”. An edited version was also preached at the 10am service of Thanksgiving for Baptism on 20 April 2008.

² Luke 23:34.

Those dear tokens of his passion
still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exultation
to his ransomed worshipers;
with what rapture ... gaze we on those glorious scars!³

But in talking of the wounds of Christ I don't think we are only speaking of physical hurt – Jesus' life on earth ended as he surrendered himself to the pain of the cross, but throughout his life he was open to others and came alongside them in their confusion, in their inadequacy, in their sin and in their pain. When Mary comes with Joseph to present the baby Jesus in the Temple, Simeon says to her “and a sword will pierce your own soul too”⁴. Simeon foretells the cost of her discipleship and of ours. We are all called to stand beside others when they suffer – as Mary stood beside her son as he died on the cross. We are called to have the courage to risk not only our own physical hurt but also to risk openness, an acceptance that we are not perfect, that we are not invincible, and that like Jesus we are vulnerable not only to our own suffering, but to the suffering of others. We bear the wounds of Christ when we visit the sick, when we sit with the bereaved, when we feel an emptiness in our own souls, when our best intentions are misunderstood or rejected, when we yearn for something wonderful that in this world is just beyond our grasp.

Later this morning we'll be holding our annual service of Thanksgiving for Baptism, and this year as part of that service we will be baptising baby Emily Reeves-Smith. Baptisms are usually happy occasions, but there is one bittersweet element which sometimes gets glossed over. Before the new Christian is washed in the waters of baptism the priest always claims him or her for Christ, he and then all the parents and godparents makes the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead. The priest then says “Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified” and everyone replies, “Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.” I'm a little surprised more parents don't balk at that bit, because it's pretty hard-hitting stuff. Little Emily will be commissioned into Christ's army, and marked with the sign of resurrection, but of resurrection won through suffering and death – she'll be marked with the wounds of Christ.

And so, as in our collect, we pray:

Risen Christ,
whose wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.

Amen

³ “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” – Complete Anglican Hymns Old & New, number 405.

⁴ Luke 2:35.