

SERMON: Sunday - 11 April 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

All will be well

John 20:19-31

1 John 1:1-2:2

It's lovely to see the transformation in people when they realise that God's love is for them and that God forgives them and wants to be with them.

Is anything else more precious?

When Jesus appears to his frightened friends cowering behind locked doors, John tells us that their fear turned to joy - Jesus was alive and standing before them with words of peace and breathing on them with power to go forth with his Spirit.

Such a powerful transformation took place in those moments of presence.

And the past was forgiven.

They had denied they knew Jesus. They had run away in fear of their lives. They didn't speak out or stand their ground. When the heat was on, they'd let their Master down.

But that was all in the past now. They were forgiven.

And now they were to forgive others as they had been forgiven.

And they were to forgive themselves too when further mistakes would come.

The Apostle Thomas has got a bad press over the years. Thomas the Doubter.

And often that's meant that it's a lack of faith to have doubt rather than a genuine desire to know God for oneself, as perhaps was the case for Thomas.

John says that his Gospel was written so that its readers might believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing they might have life in his name.

Jesus knows too well that we all have fears and doubts and that we can be envious of other people's experience of God.

Thomas may have been envious of the other disciples experience seeing the Risen Jesus.

But he had a desire to see for himself, something we all need.

And God, in Jesus, knows this and works with it. In time, one week later in Thomas' case, the Risen Christ appears to Thomas and is the proof he needed of his Lord and his God, his Master and his Maker.

The Risen Jesus is known through scars and doubts, envy and skepticism.

And rather than condemn us for feeling that way, he is patient and kind and gracious to meet us where we are, so that we might grow from there.

The disciples are to use their doubts, their fears and their mistakes as opportunities to grow in Christ.

(Slide - Thomas in India). Look how Thomas grew after this, widely thought to have planted the church in Asia).

Talking about growing through doubt and fear and mistakes, I read a new translation this week of Revelations of Divine Love by Julian of Norwich, 14th Century Christian mystic. The translator was Mirabi Starr, in which she writes:

“(Julian of Norwich) shows us that our failings and transgressions are simply an opportunity to learn and grow, and should be honoured as such, but not dwelled upon. She translates the sorrows of this life as tastes of Christ's passion and assures us that all passing pain will be transmuted into endless joy.

Most of all, she promises that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, all is well. Not just that creation was beautifully made to begin with, and that it will all work out in the end, but that everything is all right at every moment, if we could only look through the eyes of love”.

As Julian is famously quoted as saying, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

Or we might say, death is defeated. Life will triumph.

The reality of the resurrection and the Risen Christ means that life is eternal, Christ does not ultimately die and that means Christ does not die in you or me either, but is everlasting life.

John the follower of Jesus and Gospel writer tries to explain this in his Gospel and letters. In 1 John 1 he speaks of who the Christ is.

Which in paraphrase essentially says that Christ existed from the beginning as the Word of Life, the life emanating from God, eternal life which never dies, or perhaps more accurately we might say that when it does die it quickly rises to life again, so in that sense it never dies, life always triumphs death.

Even though he writes that the disciples saw him and touched him, Christ was and is, the eternal Word of God and Source of Life.

And John says that Christ has given us a message to pass on, that God is light and that Christ is God's living resurrecting presence in all of life.

And that of course harks back to John's Gospel when the Risen Jesus appears to his friends and breathes on them the Spirit of Life. He sends them just as the Father had sent him. With the same Spirit. The Spirit which is the power to forgive sin and to live life in all fullness.

Jesus is essentially saying, as I have lived, so now must you. Be at peace and go and live life my way.

So what does that Risen Life look like? Short answer, it looks like Jesus.

Sometimes we will meet people or hear about people and we will think, that sounds like Jesus, that looks like Jesus, that's the sort of thing I imagine Jesus would do.

So perhaps that's the first test. Does what is happening before me, feel like or look like Jesus? If yes, then great, the Spirit of Jesus is on the case. If not, then maybe it's some other spirit at work.

That ability to discern the difference is itself a gift of that Christ breathed Spirit which we need.

We need the ability to discern or know the truth. And we need the wisdom to think, speak and act properly. And we need the intention to do good to others, to be love and to do all things in love.

Those three things - are essential gifts that come from the Breath of Christ upon us and in us, gifts which were evident in the life of Julian of Norwich.

I want to go back to a new translation of her work which was called the Revelation of Divine Love. A writing which followed a series of visions she had when very seriously ill in the days of the Black Death. Indeed she very nearly died at age 30 and spent the rest of her life in almost total seclusion as an anchoress.

Her manuscripts were kept safe by Benedictine nuns whilst the Protestant Reformers of the 16th Century banned their publication. Much to their loss. It's only been in the last century that people have discovered her work and been blessed by it. I hope you will be too.

Here's what she says, and this is a sermon in itself:

"During our lives here on earth, we experience a wondrous mixture of well and woe. We hold inside us both the glory of the Risen Christ and the misery of the Fallen Adam. Christ protects us in our dying and, through his gracious touch, uplifts us and

reassures us that all will be well. . . . We are so fragmented, afflicted in our feelings in so many ways, that we hardly know where to turn for comfort. The various pains and transgressions of this life fill our hearts with sorrow and cloud the eyes of our souls.

But we cultivate our intention and wait for God. We have faith in his mercy and grace, and trust that he is working within us. In his goodness, he opens the eyes of our understanding and gives us insight. Sometimes we glimpse more, sometimes we see less, depending on what God gives us the ability to receive. Now he elevates us; now he allows us to come tumbling down.

The mixture of sorrow and joy is so powerful that we cannot figure out how to handle it all, let alone assess how our fellow spiritual seekers are doing. The diversity of feelings can be overwhelming. And yet, in those moments when we sense the presence of God, we surrender to him, truly willing to be with him, with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength. This holy assent is all that matters. It eclipses all the wicked inclinations inside us—physical and spiritual—that might lead us to miss the mark.

Sometimes, however, that sacred sweetness lies deeply buried, and we fall again into blindness, which leads to all kinds of sorrow and tribulation. So we must take comfort in the essential article of our faith that teaches us not to give into our negative impulses, but to draw strength from Christ, who is our defender against all harm. We need to stand up against evil, even if to do so causes discomfort—even pain—and pray for the time when God will once again reveal himself and fill our hearts with the sweetness of his presence. And so we remain in this muddle all the days of our lives. But our Beloved wants us to trust that he is always with us.”

May these words bless us today and may the presence of God meet us wherever we are and however we are feeling.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.