26/4/20 St James Bolton, ‘Dwelling with Christ’

*Third Sunday of Easter (Acts 2: 14a; 36-41 & Luke 24:13-35)*

Life is strange at the moment isn’t it? There is the physical suffering of many from Covid-19; as I wrote this there had been 18,738 deaths in the UK. So many families are impacted, & so many frontline workers continue to make huge sacrifices. But for so many others, the lockdown restrictions are feeling frustrating. When will things ‘Go back to normal’ we might well ask…and the Government cautions us with the need for widespread testing and contact tracing.

*‘Going back to normal’* was what the Israelites moaned of doing as they roamed about in the wilderness after fleeing from Egypt. The trouble is they couldn’t go ‘back’ they needed to move forward. Nor will we be able to go back, instead *we* need to go forward…and just like the Israelites we need to find a new normal…like the Israelites we need to follow God to a better place!

How will we do that? The virus seems unlikely to disappear anytime soon, though we pray for a vaccine… Some sort of restrictions also seem likely for some time to come. How can we let God lead us through this crisis to a better place…better even than where we were before this present crisis?

Our Gospel reading has some wisdom for us…

Here are 3 phrases to guide us:

* Be honest
* Be open & welcoming
* Dwell

Last week we journeyed with Thomas as he worked through his doubts to meet with the risen Christ. This week we journey with two other disciples as they walk to a village called Emmaus. Like Thomas they are distraught, in mourning at the death of Jesus. They are bereft, without hope, probably full of fear. In this state (which may sound familiar to many in our country…& to us?), the risen ‘Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him.’ (v15-16) I wonder how often we have been consumed with our own problems, at the end of our tethers, only for Jesus to come alongside us…and we haven’t recognised him. For me, it’s maybe that irritating waking up at 3am. I need to remind myself Jesus is there, reach out, what does he have to say? When you cannot see, ‘May the eyes of your heart be opened so you may have hope’ (Eph 1:18)

I love the conversation the disciples have with Jesus and how he teases out their hopes, fears, & disappointments. ‘What are you talking about?’ Jesus asks…surely, he knows, so why does he ask? He asks, to give his disciples the opportunity to voice exactly how they feel, to own those feelings. The important thing is that the disciples are ***honest***. Jesus doesn’t soothe away their fear and mourning by revealing who he is…instead he allows them to confront these feelings…to work them out, a bit like Thomas had to do last week. In John’s first letter we read that ‘Perfect love drives out fear’ (1 John 4:18)…the sense is not of a polite, soothing of fear but a kicking it out!

This process can take a while…these two disciples work it through step by step…we had hoped…what is more…in addition…they are honest about their doubt and disappointment. This is important for them, as it is for us. ***Be honest.***

Jesus is patient, he allows them, as he allows us to do this…up to a point, then he confronts them ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe…’(v25)

If I’d been one of those two, I would probably sulk at this point…but the lesson for me, maybe for you, is ***be open and welcoming.*** Be Open to what you can learn; to having your mind changed, your vision expanded, open to knowing the truth. ***Be welcoming***, (even to a stranger who’s just called you foolish!) ‘Stay with us,’…as the two disciples take that risk of being welcoming, they recognise Jesus as he breaks bread and gives it to them, as they are reminded of what he said, ‘This is my body given for you…’ (Luke 23:19).

Christ’s presence may be a challenge to us…he might reveal to us we’ve been foolish and slow to believe. But let’s take the risk ourselves & ask Him to stay with us…to ***Dwell*** with us. That word ***‘dwell’***, keeps popping into my head…I think God’s telling me something…Here’s some scriptures ‘Surely goodness and loving mercy will follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’ (Psalm 23:6) ‘For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his **dwell**ing’ (Ps 27:5) ‘Trust in the Lord and do good; **dwell** in the land and enjoy safe pasture.’ (Ps 37:3) Dwell; I think It’s a word God wants us all to learn …dwell = to reside, make a home…not just a temporary stopping place but a home. In a home we can rest, take our time. So, let Jesus dwell in you and you dwell in him.

Speaking of homes…maybe a lesson we ought to be learning at the moment is worshipping God in our homes, reading the Bible in our homes…may our homes be a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. That’s something good that could come out of this lockdown…to rediscover ‘church’ in our own homes…to welcome the presence of God in our own homes.

There is no going back to normal…let’s go forward to a new normal where God dwells in us, and in our homes. Amen