

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 1 MAY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

John 20: 24-31; Song of Songs 8: 6-7

“Reaching Through the Veil of Death”

Thomas had gone home. Or that's at least what I imagine he had done. Because, had I been him, that is most probably what I would have done. I have been in rooms full of grieving people, and I know how sometimes you just need to get out and get some air. Or need to distance yourself from all too much emotion. Or even just want to be alone for a bit, to reflect and consider and center yourself.

And especially after a Mary Magdalene came running with the story she thought she'd seen Jesus in the garden and even Peter and John came up with some confusing nonsense about an empty grave. For heaven's sake! Didn't they understand the priests had probably taken the body to make sure they would not be able to create a martyr's shrine out of it (and they may have been right there)? And unfortunate as it was, wasn't it likely that a couple of friendly words from the gardener had confused poor Mary into thinking she'd met the Lord at dawn? The grieving mind playing tricks, that's all. Nothing to fuss about, or get your hopes up.

Dead is dead. Finito. Over and done with. They should have known. Jesus himself had tried to tell them. How could he ever have dreamed Jesus and what he preached stood a chance in this world?

Seeing Jesus die on the cross had probably been enough to snap him out of the hopeful and idealistic mood where he had felt anything was possible, and made him realise the sooner they dispersed and got themselves back to Galilee the better. No point in ending up on a cross as well.

I expect many of us will be familiar with disappointment, grief, despair, and the dead emptiness of depression and disillusion and not find it particularly difficult to imagine what was going on in Thomas's heart and mind or the hearts and minds of his friends.

The whole range of human reactions to grief and trauma will have played themselves out amongst them. As they do, in any group of people confronted with these things. Some huddle together, in companionable or painful silence or may compulsively chatter about nothing much at all. Some will have deep and meaningful conversations relating to the loss. Others will try to brazen it out with a smile on their face, stubbornly putting themselves in a positive mind frame, ignoring the whole issue and reassuring themselves and everybody else that all will be well in the end. Others yet again will prefer to be alone, go home, or for a long walk. Or may withdraw into some quiet corner with something or other. It all depends on who we are, how we have been brought up to deal with these things and in what way this particular loss is affecting us.

Was Thomas the only one who craved solitude? Did he grieve differently from his friends? Or was it just coincidence that he wasn't around when the veil of their despair started lifting? Was he struggling with the way the company he found himself in was dealing with what had happened? Or was he just coming up for air after spending a couple of days in an atmosphere of grief and mourning? Had the first glimmers of hope that this may not be the end of everything after all, sent him off fuming, feeling lonely and empty and angry about the lack of rational realism displayed by his friends? Or was he just too numb to react to anything at all?

Whatever it was, he was not with them, but somewhere else. And when he returns he responds with skepticism and obstinacy to their excited exclamations. "I will believe when I see it with my own eyes" he says, "and when I feel it with my own hands..."

We've talked quite a bit about physicality in the last couple of months. Physical love, physical desire, the divine experienced in the physical, the physical as an image and expression of the divine.

Of faith being more than just an esoteric feeling, a vague awareness of the numinous, or a well intentioned middle class morality of nice people wanting to lead decent lives.

We talked about a raging flame, about an all consuming fire, a desire that loves with abandon and power, about a relationship that involves soul, body and mind.

And when we did, some of us wondered what to make of this. How did this relate with the faith most of us have been taught from Sunday school onwards? The gentle, the peaceful, the wholesome and healing love of a kind father, or a good shepherd. What we found in the Song of Songs is quite different. Unsettling, at times even frighteningly intense. Would this not take us in the direction of some of the more extreme pentecostal movements(!) like the Toronto blessing? Or one of the heresies of the Church that have occasionally appeared over the ages, considering lust and sexual indulgence as worship, and taking the words of the Song of Songs way too literally? Movements like those which established the city of God in Munster during the reformation, or the Cathars in Southern France in the middle ages.

When Dr Warren Bartlett came to talk about sexuality, and we discussed different expressions of human sexuality and their boundaries, the questions and possibilities became especially dizzying and disconcerting, and challenging. What is permissible? And why? Or more importantly: why not?

"I want to touch him" says Thomas, "Then and only then will I believe..." And we all know the often very graphic pictures depicting Thomas with his hands exploring Jesus' wounds.

What happens is something else though. Although Jesus invites Thomas to touch him, according to the text, Thomas never actually puts his hands or fingers in or on Jesus' wounds. He is invited to touch, but he never does.

Instead he himself is touched, and touched deeply.

Thomas is touched with a love stronger than death, with a passion fierce as the grave, with flashes of fire, a raging flame. He was kissed by the presence of Christ, inhaled his breath, and that's what brought him back to life.

If Thomas was anything like me, and I trust he was, because all the signs of a stubbornly rational, determined realist are there in the story, for him to have been turned around, to have been converted and brought to his knees in faith, would have taken more than just a victory of mind over matter, of faith over fact. For something like that to happen it would have taken - it takes - something that involves more than the mind, or even the soul. It takes something that burns like a raging fire, something that can't be drowned out even by a flood of reasoning and disbelief, something stronger than the conviction that death and the grave have per definition, the last word. It would be something mind blowingly and soul changingly powerful. AND it would be physical, be felt, like being hit in the stomach, knocked on the head, swept off one's feet.

Thomas, who had wandered off into the valley of death and did not believe in a return, discovers a hand reaching out to him through the barrier of the possible, touching him. A hand with holes in it. A hand with the marks of suffering and anguish, of disappointment and despair, of depression and emptiness still on it. Where else did you think that “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” came from!

Thomas finds a friend right beside him who meets him where he is at. Who comes looking for the rational, skeptical soul who thinks he knows what’s possible and what is not. He who has eaten from the tree of knowledge. Finds him and gives him new life. Seals his wounds with his love, and shows him that even *his* emptiness can be filled, that even *his* despair can be changed into shouts of joy, that even *his* stubborn rationalism can discover there is much more to life than the cold hard facts that tell us that miracles don’t happen and suffering, despair and death will always have the last word. Amen.