

Easter 2B. 19th April, 2009

Acts 4:32-35; Ps 133; John 20:19-31

Breath of Life

What happens to you –to us - when everything that defines who you are disappears? What does our faith – what do the Scriptures –contribute when our life is devastated?

Sometimes, it's not until something goes that we realise how much of our sense of self –of who we are - is bound up in that person or thing. It might be a person, a relationship, a job or career, possessions or our physical health and prowess.

The first question –what happens when it disappears –is easier to answer. Everything from complete devastation to profound loss and grief, confusion, even denial and avoidance or the pretence that “we’ll be brave”, as if something life-changing hasn’t happened..

Listen to this response, written by someone facing the devastation of the loss of a marriage:

“I saw an ad on TV for his company, his product, and my heart leapt with pride and belonging –that old automatic response, I couldn’t stop it – my heart sang out -that’s part of my life, part of who I am. Then I just as quickly realised –that’s not part of my life anymore. And a grief and emptiness swept over me –I know it wasn’t really rational, but that company, his job, was part of who I’d been for so many years, and now it wasn’t. And this was really painful – I wasn’t sure who I was anymore; all the old sign-posts and labels had disappeared. All the old bits that once gave me security and a future, and an identity and place in life, all the old hopes and dreams, that had moulded me, all tied up with us together - all of this gone.”

And so, much the same could be said following a death, retrenchment, financial loss, immigration –any profound loss or change.

Answering the second question is more complex –what does our faith, what do the scriptures tell us; how do they help us? On the one hand, we can have an excellent head knowledge of faith assurances such as hope, new life, God's comfort and so on; but on the other hand, that knowledge sits alongside the wretched emptiness and loss: our feelings finding themselves detached from that head knowledge.

How might today’s Scriptures help us? Here, today, in our Gospel reading, we have a bunch of devastated disciples; their hopes and their dreams, their identity which was bound up in their association and following of this Jesus – all of this had been ripped out, crushed, by his cruel death. What they’d come to live for –even given up their lives and livelihoods for – was down the drain. They were devastated; and now –in the evening of the third day after his crucifixion – they were confused and fearful. They’d been told that the tomb was empty, and that the women of their group had seen Jesus alive. Notice they’re not out there looking for him; notice there’s not a great celebratory party going on. They’re behind locked doors; fearful; between them, every imaginable reaction bounces around that day: Mary Magdalene’s consternation; Peter’s amazement, John’s readiness to believe without understanding, Thomas’s need of evidence.

And then, suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. They’re still hesitant, unbelieving, not recognising him, until he shows them his wounds. Then the rejoicing; and then the commissioning –“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”, and his breathing upon them of the Holy Spirit.

Now, fast forward to some time in the future after this. Something has happened to them. These same disciples, we read in Acts, joined by many others, have become the embryonic Church, sharing their lives and possessions in a community characterised by unity, by being of “one heart and soul”; a community where “there was not a needy person amongst them.”. The early uncertainties have gone; Jesus’ followers live with a vibrant resurrection faith. Everything is different. They are transformed. It’s not been a trouble-free road either – there’s been arrests and signs of persecution.

What’s been the key, here? What’s turned this group from the shadow-lands of dashed hopes and shattered identity into a transformed community, resurrected, with new life, with a reconstructed mission and focus and

sense of who they were? Simple answer –the Spirit of God; the Holy Spirit. Theirs is a community shaped, enabled and empowered by the Spirit breathed on them by Jesus. For them, the resurrection of Christ isn't just words of belief; it is a lived reality.

Remember what Jesus told his disciples before he died, as we read in John's Gospel? He promised the Holy Spirit, that although he would go away, the presence of the Spirit meant the disciples were not being abandoned. This is the same Spirit, breathing over the waters of creation; breathing life into Adam. And this is the Spirit of resurrection. Through Jesus' resurrection – his defeat of death - grace is let loose in the world, and where Jesus breathes the Spirit, there is new birth, new life in his name, strength and power to carry on his mission in the world.

It is this same Spirit received by us in our baptisms, when we are joined to Christ. The Spirit is present, alive and indwelling in us. The fact of Jesus' resurrection gives us hope of new life –for the world, for our communities of faith as we allow the Spirit to shape us corporately and individually into Christ's likeness. And the hope and longing for new life, new purpose, new meaning is given substance and life through the Spirit. That's not new life coming about through affirming a set of beliefs or life values to live by or through head-knowledge; this is new life made possible by the reality of God's very presence with us and in us. The Spirit is alive and well, ready to bring forth transformation in the lives of willing followers of Christ, whether we believe in God's Spirit or not. And always, the gift of the Spirit at work in us, changing us, is bound up with God's sending us –this is not just a gift for fabulous individual revival, but the commissioning of us as living testimony, and as agents of peace and forgiveness- God's mission in the world.

How can the resurrection story speak to any of us in our grief and loss, in our life transitions? (How might it speak to Pat in her devastating loss? How might it speak to Richard, who is now beginning to empty himself of his old life and markers of identity, as he is formed into a new identity of being priest?). We can certainly keep telling ourselves over and over again of God's promise of new life, of God's gift of the Spirit that makes it possible. We can drill this into our heads until it lodges deep. But – a bit like Thomas –we can look for the evidence –the actual marks of transformation. The disciples huddled in fear –no doubt about that – then something happened –the Spirit! And they became the Church, joyful and vibrant. And so we continue to hear and see testimony of the deep and abiding transformative work of the Spirit in the lives of God's people.

Listen again to that single mother we heard from earlier in this sermon, in the midst of the devastation of the loss of her marriage::

“I would pray constantly, and I learned a lot about trusting God completely - not a trust that He would work out everything in the way I wanted, but a trust that He was present in the turmoil and pain and confusion and would not abandon me despite anything that I might experience. There is something of a paradox to trust and know God is in there with you, while your world is falling apart around you. It's a bit like sitting on a tiny crag of rock in the ocean, not knowing exactly where or even who you are, but still knowing that you are on a secure foundation. And all around you is a mighty storm. You are wet and chilled to the bone, unable to help yourself, and terrified at times that you'll fall off and be swept away, yet something seems to hold you there even when you think you're letting go. The grace of God, the prayers of others, the community of church, friendship and support all help you to keep hold. And there's the moments when it seems like there is light and calm there somewhere, too fleeting to really pin down and grasp, but like a whisper of hope; a promise of life to come”.

There's been a lot of water under the bridge in the past 15 or so years, but since I wrote those words, I can testify to the Spirit breathing life. It took time; a lot of rebuilding; a lot of trust and many times of being carried by other's faith: but God's new life has coursed through my veins over these years. This is the work of God's Spirit: new life, transformation, deep healing of hurt, emptiness filled with joy, an identity that embraces and enjoins the past and the new, and a passion for God's mission of peace and reconciliation in the world.

This is the work of God's Spirit for all of us, for his glory.

Christ is risen. Alleluia!.