8 April 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Easter
Psalm 133; Acts 4: 32–35; 1 John 1: 1 – 2: 2; John 20: 19–31
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He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

There are two sides to today’s Gospel reading and they highlight the two sides of the Easter story which we celebrate for these fifty days until Pentecost. The first is the importance of our individual relationship with Jesus – faith is fundamentally personal. Whether it is Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul or as Carol just read, Thomas, Jesus’ resurrection appearances focus on individuals. They are intimate, personal encounters, and what matters is restoring relationships.

Some of you may know the 1970s Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, Jesus Christ Superstar. Although getting a bit old now, it brings in the assumptions of our modern, global, multimedia world. The theme song repeatedly asks the question “Why’d you pick such a backward time and such a strange land?” Admittedly neither Lloyd Webber, nor lyricist Tim Rice are known as profound theologians but they seem to assume the resurrection would have been so much more convincing if Jesus had suddenly appeared live on TV, perhaps with a big BBC1 interview or a Reddit Ask Me Anything to follow up. But in fact this misses the point. Jesus could have shown himself to tens of thousands at a time even in first century Palestine but he never makes these sort of ‘told-you-so’ appearances to anonymous crowds. The largest resurrection appearance is to 500 of the brothers at one time but that is the exception, the others are to small groups of disciples, to those who have known him, loved him. Those who have a relationship with him, albeit one that has gone wrong through denial or doubt or the fear that caused so many to scatter and flee on that fateful Maundy Thursday in the Garden of Gethsemane.
When Jesus appears to Thomas, we see that relationships matter, that the resurrection is not just about love in some cosmic or generic sense but about the men and women that Jesus spent day after day with. Thomas would not believe – the Gospel calls him not doubting but *apistos*, non-believing. He thought his friends had been driven crazy, suffered from some mass hallucination. Only if he put his hands in the wounds would he believe, only if he touched the very place where the nails went in. It’s an outrageous demand. But Jesus refuses to give up on him. The faith of one individual matters, the relationship of one individual matters and so Jesus returns; comes back to that locked room where they were gathered for fear of the Jews and offers the very thing that Thomas asked. And despite the famous Caravaggio painting, Thomas doesn’t even take him up on this but falls to his knees and worships him, “My Lord and my God!”

It’s an immensely touching story, one of love and faith restored but it’s not all today’s Gospel tells us about the resurrection. For Jesus does not just come to prove that he is alive or even just to restore individual relationships. He has another purpose, in the first encounter he breathes on the disciples and says “Receive the Holy Spirit”.

The first time I really paid attention to this, I was so busy trying to square it with St. Luke’s account of Pentecost that I missed the significance. I missed the breathing. I still don’t know whether St. John knew all about Pentecost in the form that the beginning of Acts describes it. If pushed, I’d probably say he did but didn’t think it was as important as St. Luke did. For in John’s eyes it’s not the transformation of the disciples from a scared little group into super-powered evangelists that’s at the heart of Jesus’ resurrection and God’s divine purposes but this intimate breathing.

I can’t say that my own personal experiences of being breathed on have been all that pleasant. I remember visits to have my brace checked as a teenager with a certain horror as the orthodontist had the most awful breath imaginable and had to work far too close for comfort. But I’m sure that’s not what John wants us to call to mind, rather it’s a link back to Genesis. “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2.7)

What we have here is an act of new creation. Just as God breathed into Adam’s nostrils, the risen Jesus breathes into the disciples. This isn’t merely the vindication of a holy prophet, the proof that Jesus really was the chosen Messiah but an earth-shattering event. A new creation. A new beginning. Heaven and earth becoming one. Mankind remade
in the image of God, given again the holiness and potential to become like God as he intended, not in the way Adam and Eve grasped after at the urging of the serpent.

Jesus breathes on the disciples and in that moment. Adam’s sin and its consequences are undone. And just in case you’d missed the link, it’s brought home to us. The Holy Spirit is not just about life or being close to God, it’s about forgiveness, about reconciliation, about the healing of the world. “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”.

Our gospel message today is that Easter is not just about a new life for Christ but about a new life for us. A new life on a personal level through an intimate relationship with Jesus, where we’re given a second chance, opportunity to start again, but also a new life on a cosmic level as the resurrection makes the world anew, brings in the Kingdom and makes things possible that were not before.

St. Luke tells us something of the consequences of that in our reading from Acts. It’s not just that the disciples don’t return to their old way of life before they met Jesus, they don’t return to the old way of life that they lived with Jesus. After his resurrection, they begin a new way of life altogether. They are a new creation. It’s not just that they’re hoping for a new creation as they were when they accompanied Jesus in his earthly ministry. Now they’re actually trying to live it. They try to live as a new community, they have everything in common. They try to return to the innocence and mutuality that there was in the garden of Eden.

It doesn’t quite work. Things fall apart in Acts. A result of that sense of now but not yet which surrounds our experience of resurrection, of Christ’s kingdom. It’s breaking in but it’s not fully here. We see signs but not its fullness. We come close to God, even sense his Word through the Spirit in Scriptures, in bread and wine, in one another, but still through a mirror darkly, not face to face.

But that’s the challenge for us as a cathedral community and in each of the places we’ve come from today – to live as a new creation. To be salt and light. Easter people, with something different about us, a sense that things are not the same as they always were. So let us receive the breath of the Spirit, let us cry out, ‘My Lord and my God’, let us be changed by Christ’s resurrection.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**