

*Second Sunday of Easter, 19th April 2020*

## **“WHY WRITE A GOSPEL?”**

**(Acts 2:22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:1-12; John 20:19-31)**

Books seem to be published about almost everyone nowadays. Film stars, sports stars, politicians, media personalities, heroes and criminals. The current big one seems to be Malcolm Turnbull telling why he was the good guy, and all the others were the bad guys. If there seems to be an interesting story, someone will find a publisher and get it into print! The result may be money and fame, or perhaps you'll be cut down to size because nobody buys the book.

The longest piece of work I ever wrote was an essay or thesis of 20000 words, 40 or 50 pages of my handwriting, in my final year at Moore College. It took me a lot of time: reading, investigating, thinking and planning. What I produced was actually about the length of John's Gospel, though it was far from the Gospel in depth or significance. I wrote my work because it was required as part of my course. Of course it helped that I was able to choose a subject that was of interest to me. But what about John, the author of this Gospel? Why did he write his work?

After all, I had books and libraries, modern pen and paper, even if I was not using computers back in the mid-70's. But John wrote in an age when writing was not taken for granted, and facilities were primitive. Why would he sit down and write a book this size?

Fortunately John tells us himself, towards the end of his work, in the last couple of verses of today's Gospel reading. And it's worthwhile keeping in mind that there is nothing quite like the Gospels in antiquity, and certainly nothing quite like John's Gospel! This is not simply a book of history or biography, though it tells of a real person and real events; it's not a piece of fiction or a letter or an essay. It is unique: John wrote something the like of which had never been written before.

Why did he do it? What was his aim, his purpose? Having written about the life, the miracles, the teaching and the claims of Jesus, and especially his death and resurrection, John then writes these words which close our Gospel reading: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Why did John write this extraordinary book about Jesus? He not only wanted people to **know** about Jesus: he wanted them to **put their faith** in him, and to **find life** through him.

The lead-up to this statement of John's purpose is the story of the original "doubting Thomas". Thomas is not one of the stars amongst the twelve. He's a plodder: faithful, a bit of a pessimist, not always quick on the uptake. He might describe himself as a realist rather than a pessimist: such people usually do!

But for some reason Thomas wasn't with the disciples on that night of the first Easter Day: perhaps he needed time on his own after the devastating events of Good Friday. But it was that Sunday evening when the risen Christ appeared to the other disciples behind closed doors. Jesus greeted them with words of peace and reassurance. He gave them a message of forgiveness, and assured them of the power of the Holy Spirit.

But Thomas missed all that. And when the others caught up with him and started raving on about seeing Jesus alive again, he reacted in the way you might have expected: in fact he reacted in the way I might have reacted! "Yes, I know it would be lovely if he were alive again. Yes I'm sure you had some wonderful experience. Yes I know Jesus raised other people from the dead, but he **was** alive at the time. Look, I don't know what you saw, but I'm not that easily taken in. Unless I see for myself the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were; unless I put my hand in his side where the spear went, there's no way I'm going to believe this story that he's come back to life again."

Now I'm on Thomas' side here. Thomas is not going to be conned into some supernatural ideas of resurrection: there must surely be some other explanation, whatever has happened to the disciples. But he doesn't walk away from his friends.

The following Sunday Thomas **is** there with the other disciples. The doors are locked. But Jesus appears among them, as he has done a week before: how, we do not know. It reminds us that Jesus' resurrection body is still truly Jesus' body, and yet there is something new as well. Jesus again greets the disciples with a word of peace. Then he turns to Thomas, who is no doubt stunned by all this: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop your doubting and believe."

Yes, there is a sort of rebuke for Thomas. But there is also love and understanding and reassurance. Jesus offers him real and tangible proof of his resurrection. We are not told whether Thomas took up Jesus' offer to check him out: perhaps he didn't need to.

What he did know now was that the apostles' story was no fabrication, no delusion. This was the real Jesus - the man who nine days ago had hung and died on the cross. The Lord had indeed risen!

Doubting Thomas no longer has any doubts. "My Lord and my God", he cries out in excitement and joy and astonishment - and in **worship**. He believes! And in his newfound belief he has made the greatest personal statement of faith to be found in the Gospels.

He has not only acknowledged Jesus as his master, his king, his lord: many have done that. He has recognized Jesus as his **God**: the Lord, the God of Israel and the God of creation who has come to live among his people, to die and to rise again. Earthbound Thomas has taken in the claims of Jesus and the events of Easter, and recognized the essential divinity of his master.

And this is no foolish ignorant over-the-top outburst from Thomas. Jesus does not correct him: on the contrary, he accepts his worship, and states a new beatitude. "Thomas, you now believe because you have seen it all for yourself. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Thomas had a great blessing, a great advantage over most people of his day, and certainly of ours. He was able to see and to touch, and to believe on that basis. We do not have that privilege. Our faith cannot be based on that sort of experience: it is not based on actual sight.

But Christian faith is not blind faith. It is reasonable faith: what actually happened **is** important, for faith which is of substance must be based on reality. Of course we cannot go back in time to see all these things for ourselves. We cannot recreate the Easter event. But we can certainly be encouraged by one whose disbelief was conquered when he saw for himself.

Blessed are **we**, if we believe in the risen Christ, though we have not seen the historic event for ourselves. Blessed are we, if we take the lead from Thomas, whose experience was recorded by John to encourage us in our faith. Blessed are we if we truly acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and our God.

With this event, John reaches the climax of his Gospel. As for us, we can read of the risen Christ, but we may not yet literally see him for ourselves. Blessed are we if we commit ourselves to him in true faith. And as John records those words of Jesus, he reflects that this is the reason he has gone to the effort of writing this marvellous Gospel. That we, and people like us, and people not so like us, may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised King and Saviour of God's people. That we may believe that Jesus is the unique Son of God, who shares in the very nature of his heavenly Father, and who opens the way into the eternal and loving presence of our Creator. And John's purpose is that as we trust in Jesus, we may come to experience God's gift of eternal life, God's gift to all who trust and follow his Son.

Faith in Jesus Christ: that is the response John seeks from all who read his Gospel. Not the theoretical faith that says: "OK, it may be true. So what?" But the commitment of faith that links us up with Christ as we go through life with its ups and downs, its challenges and its triumphs.

John wants his readers to become followers of Jesus, depending on him for forgiveness, receiving his gift of life eternal. And to those who are already Christ's followers, he says: maintain that faith, that commitment. Don't let go; don't drift away. Blessed are we if we believe, even though we have not seen. And remember that through the Holy Spirit, we have the challenge and the privilege of bearing witness to the Gospel of Christ, and pointing people to the one who brings forgiveness, hope and eternal life.

Thomas and the others saw and believed. John saw and believed. Faith in Christ is based on reality. May we all hold fast to Jesus, the truly risen and living Lord; and may we keep trusting in him as the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is **our Lord and our God**. Amen. *Paul Weaver*

*This sermon is a revision of one preached at St.Aidan's West Epping in April 2007.*