

The Real Deal- Easter 2

In moments of fantasy, I have thought that if I had my life over again, I would have liked to work in the media: particularly in broadcasting.

Not the technical bits of course. That's way beyond my capabilities. But I am interested in how the system works, who's involved and in decisions about what goes out to the general public.

I have a cousin who used to work for the Radio 4 drama department. He wasn't an actor but did all sorts of interesting stuff to guarantee the quality of radio plays.

I am a big fan of Radio 4 and in my somewhat silly dreams that's where I'd have found my niche.

I'm more interested in the spoken word. I don't think it would have been TV for me. And I'm absolutely certain, I wouldn't have wanted to be a presenter: my face familiar to thousands, if not millions, of people.

So, fantasies aside, it's a bit of a shock to have to have my face displayed on screen to an audience.

OK its Zoom and not the BBC: it's probably 40-50 people rather than thousands.

Nevertheless it is somewhat daunting. Especially when I have been forced to cut my own fringe and don't have the BBC make up department to hide the bits of my face that I don't like.

But, as you sit in the comfort of your homes and watch and listen to me, I expect you're thinking that it's not like the real Sunday morning.

It's not quite the real me that you see. You can't touch me: you can only see half of me, you can't smell my perfume or see the infamous slippers.

Maybe it's not me at all. Perhaps I am just some sort of clever CGI graphic and the real me is still in bed.

Of course we are extremely grateful for the Zoom system that means we can still in some way meet to worship.

But I reckon it makes us realise how much we miss the real thing. And part of the real thing is that ability to use our hands; the ability to touch.

Years ago, when the Church of England first brought in the concept of sharing the peace physically, by shaking a hand or giving a hug, it caused a lot of controversy. There were those who thought this really wasn't cricket.

A priest, who had just started this practice in his church, told me that one morning an old lady said to him, as she was leaving church, that it was the first time that anyone had touched her all week.

Touch is, of course, important.

In his Maundy Thursday service, a few weeks ago, Bishop Paul said 'physicality matters'.

We hug, we kiss, we shake hands, we pat on the back, we stroke, we hold hands, we receive the hand of blessing.

And it's not just touch from our friends and family. We rely on the touch of our hairdresser, our barber, our doctor and even the dreaded dentist.

I couldn't hug a prisoner when I had had to give him some bad news, but a gentle tap on the shoulder or the arm seemed to hold a special significance.

I've read that skin to skin contact is vital not only for our emotional health but for our physical health too. Touch can also calm bodily functions such as heart rate and blood pressure.

And now, in this strange new world that we find ourselves in, we miss it. I miss not being able to hug my grandchildren and I certainly miss the skills of my hairdresser.

In today's strange new world we aren't allowed to touch. Today touch can literally (and that's a word I usually try to avoid) mean death.

So maybe we can now have particular sympathy with disciple Thomas.

Perhaps we can understand him in a way that we never quite could before.

With the Thomas who wanted to touch. With the Thomas for whom touch would answer his burning question. With Thomas for whom a touch would replace doubt with certainty. With Thomas who wanted to be certain he had the real deal, not just some hope or dream that might or not be true.

Maybe too, we more than ever before, can understand the fear of that group of disciples, who had shut themselves away 'for fear of the Jews'.

Their exciting lives shared with a rising religious star had suddenly changed into what appeared to be a total disaster.

Even though some claimed to have met the risen Jesus, all wasn't clear. That must have been very strange for them, not totally understanding what was going on; uncertain of the future.

I find that now suddenly sounds very familiar.

For some reason, and the Bible can be very annoying in what it leaves out, Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared to that group, hidden in an upper room.

He seems to be the one that gets the bad press, 'doubting Thomas' and all that, but Thomas wasn't the only doubter that first Easter.

The writer of Mark's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene told the disciples that she had seen Jesus and that he was alive, but they didn't believe her. He also tells us two people walking in the countryside met Jesus.

When they reported back to the group of disciples they weren't believed either.

Thomas was probably like many of us. He wanted certainty, proof, evidence. Fake news was no good for him.

A 'maybe', a 'possibly', a 'perhaps', an 'if only'.... just wouldn't do.

Thomas wanted to have faith in Jesus. He'd followed him for long enough. He had believed in him for long enough. Indeed, he was the first one to call Jesus God.

But his faith had been dashed and he wasn't prepared to make that huge leap of faith. The leap of faith that said all wasn't lost; that it wasn't the end, that it was actually the start of a new beginning. And who could blame him?

But in spite of all this stuff, this information, these stories, swirling round his head, Thomas didn't lose sight of what mattered. He didn't pack up his things and go home, sulking, or angry or heartbroken.

He famously demanded proof, real, physical, warm, living breathing proof. Even the testimony of his closest friends didn't satisfy. Well, we all know friends can be wrong sometimes!

Who could blame him?

And who could blame us? We live in a world where physical proof matters.

We can't get into the theatre or a concert without the ticket: we can't fly off on holiday without the little book, be it red or blue, that tells who we are; we need written evidence to prove that we are married or baptised or that we have passed our driving test.

So how would I have reacted that first Easter? How would you have reacted that first Easter?

Would you have gone with the gossip, because that was actually the news you wanted to hear or would you be a bit Tomasish-needing proof, real physical confirmation?

Funnily enough, after all that, when push came to shove, Thomas believed when he saw Jesus and he didn't need to touch him. Thomas got it.

And as for us-the 'shut away in a room for fear of the virus' ones, we don't get that proof: the chance to see or touch our risen Lord.

It all seems a bit hopeless. Hopeless till we remember.

Till, we remember that, thank goodness, Jesus spoke special words. Words not meant for the disciples, not meant for Thomas, but meant for Christians down the centuries, meant for you and for me, and, perhaps, especially meant for us when the future seems so uncertain.

Jesus' words ring out to us. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'.

We are meant to be together on a Sunday morning.

We are meant to open our prayer books and our hymn books with our hands, we are meant to sing with our lungs and our voices, we are meant to hug or shake hands during the peace, we are meant to eat the bread and drink the wine.

Shut away in our own little boxes, we now have to find new ways of worship. We have to find new ways of meeting God. We have to find new ways of communicating. We have to find new ways of praising and praying. We have to find new ways of thinking.

They may not involve actually touching or actually hearing or actually seeing but they meet us in a different way. And I believe they take on an extra special meaning this coronavirus season. I hope they alight our hearts and stir our spirits.

We don't have the opportunity given to Thomas to see and to touch but we can still seek to know and to believe.

My friends, today be assured you are indeed blessed.

Amen