



Sunday 27th April 2025

John 20: 19-31

The Rev'd Canon Jenny Wilson

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying, ... Amen.

On Sunday morning two weeks ago, the Boikos were on their way to church to celebrate Palm Sunday. Like most hard-up pensioners, they went by public transport. A ride costs eight hryvnia (about 30 cents). Their bus, No 62, was driving down Petropavlivska Street in the centre of Sumy, north-eastern Ukraine. On either side were elegant buildings belonging to Sumy state university. It was 10.23am.

A Russian Iskander missile carrying cluster munitions plunged down from the sky, exploding next to the bus. Shrapnel engulfed the Boikos, other passengers and people in the street strolling past cafes and shops. The couple died instantly. Another missile hit the university's conference centre, 200 metres away, punching through its glass atrium and balcony.

Rescuers saw an apocalyptic scene. Bodies lay sprawled on the ground, cars burned, smoke billowed. The blast ripped a hole in the university's economics and business department. It blew out the windows and wooden doors from the 19th-century institute of applied physics across the road. Fragments flew through the institute's garden, shredding tulips and roses. ...

"It was Palm Sunday, a holiday, a day off," one Sumy resident, Tetyana, explained. "The weather had recently warmed up and people were on their way to church. We have a tradition in Ukraine that we buy willow branches."¹

And on the same day there was the attack on the hospital in Gaza. "Al Ahli Hospital is out of service," WHO spokesperson Dr Margaret Harris told UN News, after the airstrike early on Palm Sunday morning. "The pharmacy was destroyed, many of the different buildings and services were destroyed."

Some 40 patients whose condition is too critical to be moved from the health facility are continuing to receive care, while the 50 other remaining patients – including the child who died - were evacuated to other medical centres shortly before the attack began.²

Two weeks later, in cathedrals and churches across the world, on this second Sunday of Easter we hear the following words:

¹ /www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/15/its-sheer-terrorism-sumy-buries-dead-after-russias-palm-sunday-attack?

² news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162191

When it is evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met are locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus comes and stands among them and says, 'Peace be with you.'

We are so accustomed to the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples that we might not stop to wonder what the fear of the disciples was like, how profound that fear was. Was it like the fear of people living in Ukraine not knowing when the next attack would come? Was it like the fear of those working in the hospital in Gaza wondering if they will be able to care for their patients in the hours that lie ahead? Jesus' disciples know deep fear after his death and the strange stories that he might be alive. And then he comes. And stands among them and says, 'Peace be with you.'

How do we hear Jesus words in our time, our place. We walked our Palm Sunday in a peaceful procession on a sunny day, carrying olive branches holding up our palm crosses for blessing. We sang the beloved hymn, "All Glory Laud and Honour", led by a trumpet and our choir as we remembered the journey Jesus took on the donkey to Jerusalem. We remembered the cries of "Hosanna", the joyful day, before we entered the Cathedral and read the Passion Story, Luke's Passion this year. We enacted the role of the crowd, the crowd whose "Hosanna" cries had turned into cries for blood, "Crucify him, crucify him," shedding light of the fickleness of human nature, a fickleness that we shudder to admit is our own. But we were safe as we walked. Our journey was not bathed in fear as the Palm Sunday journey of other human beings like us only living far away in Gaza, in Ukraine, and in countries whose names we barely know. Lynn Arnold on his sermon that Palm Sunday night when we prayed and lit candles for peace, told us that there are over one hundred wars taking place in the world.

What do we make of Jesus' words "Peace be with you." Can they reach us, we might ask. Perhaps, more importantly, can they reach the people of Gaza and Israel, the people of Russia and Ukraine?

Thomas is not with them when Jesus comes. The other disciples tell him they have seen the Lord. Thomas says to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

Only Thomas does see Jesus. It is week later when the disciples are again in the house, and Thomas is with them this time. Although the doors are shut, Jesus comes and stands among them and says, 'Peace be with you.' Then he says to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answers him, 'My Lord and my God!'

It is the one who doubts who comes to believe. To believe in a way that the scholar David Ford believes is the key moment of faith in John's Gospel. He writes this:

"On the night before Jesus died, Thomas had said to him, "...How can we know the way?" and Jesus had answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. ...Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me ...". The combination of seeing and believing, in which what is believed goes beyond what is seen, amounts to knowing, and all pivots around who Jesus is in relationship with the Father. – that is now actualized for Thomas. In the opening words of the Prologue [to John's gospel] the reader has been told that Jesus is divine; now finally a character in the story says it directly, after the completion of the climactic works of Jesus, laying down and taking up his life: "My Lord and my God!" David Ford continues with a powerful assertion about Thomas' declaration. He writes: "The theology of the Gospel is complete at this point."³

Thomas found God in the place of doubt. Thomas named Jesus as holy in the place of doubt. Doubt is not to be dreaded or avoided, it seems. Doubt is where deep truth might be found. I wonder if this will help us when we wonder about Jesus' words of peace.

As we ponder the horror of the violence in the world, as we struggle to imagine how to pray, how to mind, how to imagine a different world perhaps doubt about God bringing peace is the right place to be. How do we pray? How do we mind? How do we imagine a different world? Perhaps Thomas is our guide.

'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

He said to the disciples. But in the end, when Jesus came and stood beside him, Thomas didn't seem to need to put his finger in the mark of the nails or in the wound in Jesus' side. Jesus' presence, Jesus' words to him, were all he needed for belief to sweep over him.

Perhaps that is how we pray, ... like Thomas, heavy with doubt. What do we want to see, to touch, to experience? What will help us believe? A couple in north eastern Ukraine catching a bus to a Palm Sunday gathering, carrying willow branches, travelling in peace? The doctors and nurses at the Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza going about their work of healing men and women and children who have been harmed in the war, going about the work in safety. Is that what we long to see? And more importantly, how would those who live in places of war pray? What would they long to see?

³ David Ford *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* pp 408-409.

The one with the marks of the nails in his hands and the mark of the spear in his side, the crucified and risen one, walked into a room bathed in fear and said “Peace be with you.” As we sit with so many places in our world that are bathed in fear, woven with doubt that things will ever change, let us hear him say again, “Peace be with you.”