

*When wounds become scars*

In this time of lockdown and social distancing it is perhaps appropriate to turn our attention to a securely locked room in Jerusalem, where we read of two incidents: the first on the day Jesus rose and appeared there to his disciples, and the second one week later. And so often our focus when we read this passage is on the disciple Thomas, Thomas who was not present the first time and who could only believe when he had seen with his own eyes what the others were claiming. Maybe we focus on him because we know what it's like to have our faith tested, or to struggle with faith, and we are reassured by his doubts.

There are, however, other things going on in this passage and the focus on Thomas might divert our attention away from what it is that Thomas is directed to, what he is pointed towards – and I'm referring to Jesus wounds. These are an important part of this narrative and a crucial means for Jesus to identify himself. So we read in verses 19 and 20, 'Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'. After he said this he showed them his hands and his side.' And again, in the second encounter a week later, when Thomas is present, we read that Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side...'

Down through the centuries many Christians have meditated upon Christ's wounds. Indeed in later times Christians experienced the phenomena of *stigmata*, where the wounds of Christ were replicated in their own flesh: very often women, though Francis of Assisi was the first recorded case. So what do these wounds signify? What story do they tell? What is the significance of the fact that our faith is founded upon a Messiah with wounds, a Messiah who is able to point to his pierced hands and side? Well, of course those marks speak volumes. They speak of the clash between the politics of this world and the politics of Jesus' Kingdom, the fact that the religious and political powers of this world conspired to send Jesus to a tortuous death. They tell us that when God's rule engages with human rule blood is spilt. Yes, there are political dimensions to Christ's wounds. But of course they speak too of love, a sacrificial love, a love that suffered for the sins of the world, for these wounds proclaim the price of our redemption. And of course they speak too of the unfathomable mystery of a suffering God. In the face of the mystery of pain and suffering in the world, in the face of the absurdity – obscenity even – of a faith that speaks of a loving God in a world of hellish torment and injustice the Christian faith quickly runs out of words. All we can do is point to the wounds of Christ, to a God who deals with suffering by entering into it and sharing it in order finally to defeat it from within. As the poet Edward Shillito said in the poem we read earlier,

'But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.'

Or, as the theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, 'only a suffering God can help.' Jesus' wounds testify to such a God.

I have a question, however. Should we call what Jesus showed his disciples his wounds – or his scars? Because if you think about it, they are not quite the same thing. What's the difference? Well, the difference is that scars are what wounds become when they heal. Wounds are ruptures, intrusions, invasions of our bodies. They are open and they are usually painful and they bleed. And because they are open they become infected and they spread infection and that can be fatal. But scars are the memories, the traces of wounds. They are testimony to the power of healing, to closure.

Of course, we all carry scars. Some of them are reminders of things we would like to forget, but others we are quite proud of. Some of you women may carry the scars of a Caesarean delivery – what a clutch of memories might cluster around a scar like that! One poet has described scars as 'the short stories of the flesh' – they all tell tales of some kind. Or try this from another poet, Leonard Cohen. He says in one of his novels, "Children show scars like medals. Lovers use them as a secrets to reveal. A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh." I like that. Children show scars like medals because they're proud of them. And for lovers scars disclose their hidden past as intimacy deepens between them. And then, 'A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh.'

Cohen is speaking here of our capacity to wound one another through our words, and that is frightening. But of course he is also referring to the Christ of John's Gospel who, he tells us at the beginning of his gospel, was God's Word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace of truth. And now here, towards the end of his gospel, John shows us the result of the divine Word becoming flesh – there are scars. But note! They are scars - in other words healed wounds.

This risen Jesus, after all, is the embodiment of healing. In him the healing of the great breach between God and the world is healed. In him all of creation which is groaning and sighing in pain is promised healing. That is why he breathes upon the disciples in this room because risen from the grave Jesus' whole being breathes wellbeing and healing and peace and reconciliation. By his wounds-become-scars we are healed.

There are, however, others in this scene who are wounded, at least to begin with. Yes, Jesus may be the only one with marks to show but these disciples gathered here on the first occasion are deeply wounded. They are injured and hurting. Just think of the description of them – 'behind locked doors for fear of the Jews'. What makes you hide behind locked doors, apart from a virus? What makes you steal away to some place where you can turn the key in the lock and be protected from the outside world? These disciples are traumatised and fearful. Yes, earlier on that day Peter and the beloved disciple had been to the tomb and found it empty, but they had yet to see the risen Lord and they do not yet understand, and with the rest of the disciples they are shattered by the events of the past days when their world had come crashing down. And so they hide away. And suddenly Jesus is there and he blesses them, 'peace be with you', and shows them his scars and again he pronounces peace, and then he breathes upon them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit!' And of course this is the moment when their resurrection begins, their rising out of fear and into life.

If you heard my Easter Day sermon you may recall that we need to read this part of John's Gospel with early chapters of the Book of Genesis in mind. The scene of discovery of the empty tomb is set in a garden where Jesus meets Mary Magdalene and that carries echoes of the Garden of Eden and of Adam and Eve. Back there in Eden we read that God breathed life into the dust to create Adam and to give him life, and now Jesus breathes upon these wounded disciples and at once there are the beginnings of new life, of healing, of resurrection. And from this moment onwards these disciples will become the community of the scarred. Yes, they are destined for suffering. Earlier on Jesus has warned that if the world hated him it would hate them too. Just like Jesus, his followers will find themselves at that bloody place where they collide with the politics and the powers of the world. And beyond that, they will not be spared all the wider pain and the wounds that life in the world inflicts upon us all. But with the breath of the Holy Spirit, with the breath of Christ's shalom upon them, they will discover at least the first tentative stirrings of healing, of resurrection, of peace. This is the gift of the Spirit - that wounds become scars.

Celebrating Easter this year, on this occasion, we need to speak of healing. I don't want to go on and on about the Covid 19 pandemic and to squeeze every sermon to fit this mould. There are, after all, other things to talk about. But at time like this we need to speak of healing if our faith means anything to us at all, and not just healing from this virus. For the current pandemic and its effects hold a mirror up to us of all the ways in which we need healing – all the ways in which we are wounded, and fearful and hurt and an Easter faith must address these. And we look to Jesus, the risen Lord and we ponder his scars.

The English author, Graham Greene, wrote a novel, *The End of the Affair*, in which there is a moment when a woman ponders her lover's body. She says, '... I thought of a scar on his shoulder that wouldn't have been there if once he hadn't tried to protect another man from a falling wall. The scar was part of his character, and I knew I wanted that scar to exist through all eternity.' A scar becomes part of our character and we might wonder if Christ will bear the marks on his hands and his feet and his side forever. Are they part of his eternal identity? Who knows? Wounds? – no. They are long gone. But you could argue that Christ's scars, like ours, are part of his character, and bear eternal witness to who he is and what he came to do.

So, in brief: Christ's scars bear eternal witness to God's immersion in our pain. They speak of the suffering God, who alone can address us. And Christ's scars embody a promise: that there is

healing, that by the grace of God our wounds and our hurts and our suffering do not have the last word – there can be some measure of healing, however incomplete, in this life. And Christ's scars challenge us therefore that our wounds do not define us, they do not take over our identity. And they therefore give us strength and hope to live with suffering and not to be destroyed by it.

That is the Easter Gospel not just for times of lockdown and infection and fear, but for all times. And to God be praise and glory. Amen.