

Sermon for 8 April 2018 (Second Sunday of Easter)

Acts 4. 32-35; Ps. 133; John 20. 19-end.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This simple sentence in our Gospel reading this morning, spoken by our Lord to the disciples at his first appearance to a gathering of ten of them, has become known among New Testament scholars as the Charter of the Church. In today’s terminology it is perhaps more widely expressed as the Mission of the Church. Whichever expression one favours, its threefold meaning is the same.

First, it means that Jesus Christ needs the Church, which is summed up in Paul’s words in some of his letters when he called the Church the body of Christ. Jesus had come to live among men and women with a message for all people; now, following his death and resurrection, he was going back to the Father. He needed and still needs the Church to take that message to all people throughout the world. In other words, Jesus Christ is dependent on his Church.

Secondly, the Church needs Jesus. People who are sent out to do a job, on a mission, need to be sent by someone; they need a message to take; they need authority to back that message; and they need someone to be able to turn to when they are in doubt and difficulty. Jesus, and through his sending upon the first disciples and ever since on all members of his Church the comforting power of the Holy Spirit, is that person. Hence, the Church is dependent on Jesus.

Thirdly, the Church must learn from Christ’s example of perfect obedience and perfect love. The Father had sent out His Son as His messenger in the knowledge that Jesus would render to God that perfect obedience and love. So the Church can only be fit to be the messenger of Christ when it perfectly loves and perfectly obeys him. It follows that the Church must never set out to propagate its own message or to follow policies of human devising. It must always be out to follow the will and to propagate the message of Christ. If the Church tries to operate or to solve some problem in its own wisdom and strength, without taking account of the will and guidance of the Lord and Master who gave the commission, it will inevitably fail - as we have seen it do so often through history over nearly two thousand years.

Following Jesus’s commission, he breathed on the disciples and said **“Receive the Holy Spirit”**. This must have meant something different from what it meant to the group of disciples assembled on the first Pentecost Sunday to receive the Holy Spirit as the promised Comforter. From the Greek word used for ‘breathing on’ it seems that John was likening this act to the breathing of God of life into the first man He created (in the account in Genesis chapter 2) and likewise when God breathed on the bones in the valley in Ezekiel’s vision to re-create the dead people - where the same word used by John was used in the Greek version of the Old Testament. So perhaps John intended to show that, following his resurrection, Jesus was re-creating the disciples who had walked with him during his own mortal life on earth.

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Then follows another difficult sentence. ***“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*** Following William Barclay, whose books on studying the Bible I greatly cherish, I don't think this can be understood literally. God alone is able to forgive or condemn, since He knows the innermost thoughts and the hearts of each human being. But it is the great privilege of the Church to proclaim the message of God's forgiveness and mercy to all men and women. As William Barclay concludes, the sentence ***“lays down the duty of the Church to convey forgiveness to the penitent in heart (those who bitterly regret what they have done wrong) and to warn the impenitent (those who are not even prepared to acknowledge their faults) that they are forfeiting the mercy of God”***.

The empty tomb was not the whole story but it was the first piece in the jigsaw of what happened between that first Easter morning and the first Pentecost, when the Christian Church may have been said to have been born. For those first disciples to be convinced that the person they met was indeed the risen Christ, it was essential that they had also had the witness of the women and Peter and John that the tomb had no body in it. This fact helped to confirm that Jesus had indeed risen with His body and was not just a spirit. Even though that body had been changed into an immortal body, it could be recognised, as Thomas did immediately on this the Second Sunday of Easter, as the body of one who had been crucified and who could be touched and handled and take food. We cannot tell, and no scientist on earth could begin to describe, what differences there could have been in the physical make-up of Jesus's body before and after His resurrection, or what changes will take place in our bodies when we reach that glorious state of eternal life. Our Christian faith remains firmly based on the bedrock that Jesus died on the cross, was buried in a tomb, that on the third day the tomb was found to be empty and Jesus was seen in resurrection life in bodily form, that He later ascended into heaven and that one day, we pray soon, He will return in power and glory.

In the meantime as part of the Church we have Christ's commission ***“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”*** to carry out. Our task is to spread the good news about Jesus's resurrection, which is the central tenet of the whole Christian faith. To be a Christian is to be, not just someone who knows *about* Jesus, but a person who *knows* Jesus. Our faith should never stand still. Because Jesus Christ is our living Lord, there are always new wonders and new truths waiting for us to discover. Jesus is a living presence in His Church and we should always be on the outlook to meet Him, in our fellow human beings, in our thoughts, and in our prayers, - and on that glorious day when He comes again.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Alleluia. Amen.