

Sermon for Easter 2

Mother Emma

Reading: John 20:19-end

Our hearts today go out to Her Majesty The Queen and the whole Royal Family, as well as the millions across the nation and the world who mourn the death of His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh. For so many of us, the Duke of Edinburgh in his role as Prince Consort has been a fixture throughout our entire lives; he represented stability, duty, inspiration, humour and above all, support for the monarch as Head of our nation and Commonwealth. It is hard to imagine a world in which he is no longer a feature, and we pray for his family as we give thanks for a long life, well-lived.

Yet at the beginning of the Queen's reign, as Prince Philip took on the somewhat mysterious role of Prince Consort following the tragic early death of King George VI, things may have looked very different. In a time of great personal and national grief, these two young people faced a life of public service, for which his role, at least, had little precedent.

Our Gospel reading this morning brings us back to the disciples, following Jesus' death, as they too cope with grief and pain, whilst being aware that they have a vital calling to continue the life of their leader while having no idea what this might look like for them. It is far from being an identical scenario, but the passing on of a mantle to people also coping with personal grief may sound familiar.

We learnt this weekend that Prince Philip himself was very interested in theological reflection and thought and Her Majesty The Queen is, of course, well-known as someone of a strong and devoted faith, who has felt herself upheld by God in the most difficult of times. In 2002, she wrote, *I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian Gospel*. We hope and pray that this faith sustains her now in her sorrow.

Yet there are many across the nation who may also be dealing with sorrow and loss this year who find it rather harder to be certain of their faith. It is quite possible that some who were present in our congregations as we rejoiced in the glory of Christ's rising from the dead last Sunday went home after all the excitement and wondered secretly if Christ's Resurrection did all really happen, just as the Bible describes... But the story of Thomas, who doubted, has surely been retained in the Gospel, and placed in the Lectionary each year on this, the first Sunday after Easter, precisely to address the doubts and concerns that may arise in the aftermath of the celebrations.

It seems to me that two things can cause our faith to wobble and doubts to creep in, and both of these are addressed in the story of Thomas.

The first is when we are asked to see Christianity as an entirely happy thing, with no Good Friday, and simply the unquestioning joy and excitement of Easter Day, or if we think that as

Christians, we should never allow ourselves to feel despondent or doubtful. Secondly, for many of us it is not enough to take the story of our faith on trust – we need to see some physical manifestation of it in the world around us.

Thomas is a pragmatic and for many of us, a very recognisable figure. He witnesses the excitement and emotion of others who have seen the risen Christ, but cannot bring himself to be caught up in it until he has seen the literal proof for himself, and can experience not only the joy, but in touching the nailmarks, feel the reality of Jesus' pain as well. It is only in contemplating Christ's suffering as well as his miraculous Resurrection, that Thomas is able to arrive at that heartfelt declaration of faith, "My Lord and my God!"

Of course, unlike Thomas, we do not have the opportunity to put our fingers into the nailmarks in Christ's hands and feet, or to see the wound in his side to satisfy our own need for physical experience and to allay our own doubts and confusion. We are asked instead to accept the eyewitness accounts of others – of Peter and the other disciples, who can declare, "This Jesus God raised up and of this we all are witnesses." But if we struggle to take on trust witnesses from two thousand years ago, the actions which the disciples took as they forged their own roles in the new normal after Christ was no longer with them on earth mean that we are offered another way to experience the risen Body of Christ in a completely new and yet Biblical way - in the joy and warmth of the Christian community built upon the teaching of the apostles.

The Introduction to the Peace used during Eastertide is taken almost word for word from this morning's reading and can remind us that the liturgical sharing in the Peace is not simply an over-friendly 1970s invention, but is, like the Eucharist itself, a re-remembering of a powerful Biblical scene. "The risen Christ came and stood among his disciples, and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then were they glad when they saw the Lord."

The word glad has perhaps lost some of its force and meaning in English over recent years, and so this phrase may seem to be a masterful expression of British understatement(!), as the disciples see their crucified and risen Lord miraculously appearing amongst them. But we are offered the chance here in sharing the Peace, to share physically in some small way in the experience of Thomas and the other disciples in the upper room, as we see Christ reflected in those around us with all their deep joys and sufferings, and feel ourselves enveloped in his peace.

Perhaps through such experiences, and by the knowledge of Christ's suffering as well as his glory, we may, in company with Her Majesty, be reassured that the risen Christ is truly with us in our sorrow and in our joy, and supremely in the warmth, love and peace of the physical Body of Christ gathered here together in his name. Amen.