

Lord God, may we feel Jesus' breath today and receive his Spirit as we study your word. Amen.

- I have my faith and that's that.
  - Have you ever heard yourself uttering words like that? Often a little defiantly, in the face of possibly slightly aggressive questioning or mocking about why you are going to church?
- Well, why are you here today? What is your faith? How would you answer that question? ...
- Today's bible passages state clearly the answer to the questions
  - Our faith is based upon the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the King of all creation.
  - Indeed he is *'the ruler of the kings of the earth'* as we heard in the reading from Revelation.
  - These readings *'are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'* as St John tells us in the Gospel.
- So when I asked you the question, 'What is your faith?', if you answered in terms of believing in God, or feeling that 'there must be something there', think again, Christian faith is much more specific than that.
  - Our faith is based upon the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the King of all creation.
    - Indeed he is *'the ruler of the kings of the earth.'*
  - Today's passages *'are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'*
- I want to get one thing straight before we move on, Thomas doubted and he seems on the surface to have been criticised for it. And if you are anything like me, you doubt rather a lot as well, especially when you look at the state of the world, and you wonder, 'Why doesn't God do something about it?'
  - But actually the opposite of doubt is certainty, not faith. Faith is what we have when we don't have certainty. You need very little faith to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow or that these stone slabs beneath my feet are safe to walk on. That's because it is almost completely certain that the sun will rise and I will not fall through a hole in the church floor.
  - You need rather more faith to believe that Jesus is going to answer your prayers, or that he is present in communion in bread and wine, or that God cares about the world when there is so much suffering.
    - In such situations it is natural, and dare I say it, healthy, to have some doubts. To doubt is to wrestle with the apparent contradictions between faith and life. To do so is to start the process of making connections between the two, and to unlock the doors of your heart and stop you keeping your faith private and useless and impotent and to allow the Holy Spirit to convert it into something very public and powerful and useful.
      - So please don't worry, if you doubt. Rather, wrestle with the doubts and offer them to Jesus and see what happens!
      - Faith is for when we do not yet see face to face!
- So, now we've dealt with that, back to the bible readings!
- To recap: Our faith is based upon the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the King of all creation.
  - Indeed he is *'the ruler of the kings of the earth.'*
  - Today's passages *'are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'*
- In St John's Gospel, there is a really personal aspect to today's reading. It's not about a set of theoretical beliefs. The disciples knew that Jesus had risen from the dead because they saw him and spoke with him. Thomas was convinced when he was invited to touch Jesus' wounded hands.
  - We have not seen Jesus in this way. We have not come face to face with the large gash in his risen side. Yet we are the ones whom Jesus is speaking about when he says *'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'*

- So what for you and me count as the personal aspect of faith that Thomas and the rest of the disciples in the locked upper room gained when they spoke with the risen, but still wounded Jesus?
  - Is it lame to talk about feeling close to him in prayer?
  - Is it lame to speak of the feeling of togetherness you get when you share with Jesus in bread and wine?
  - Is it lame to notice the ebullience and strength from sharing the Peace with other believers?
  - Is it lame to understand the increase in faith that comes from studying the word of God with other Christians in a Home Group?
  - Is it lame to glimpse the eyes of the suffering Christ in the suffering of people in the world and to react with compassion as a result?
- Well, you tell me. But all those are reasons that I am a Christian today. They are all personal reasons that affect me emotionally. I am a Christian far more because of reasons like these than because I have studied the evidence and come to an intellectual answer.
- On the other hand, if Christ had not been raised:
  - Jesus would not be the firstborn of the dead, because he would still be dead. There would be no new creation for us to be part of and hope would still be dashed.
  - The book of Acts would never have happened
  - There would be no assurance of forgiveness and evil would have triumphed over good.
  - There would be no meeting Jesus in the breaking of bread
  - There would be sure hope for those who have died.
  - God would still be remote, because Jesus, who had come close, was close no longer.
  - And the disciples would still be frightened as the doors of the Upper Room would still be locked.
- Are the doors of your heart locked or have you allowed Jesus to walk through them.
  - And if you have, what does this mean in your context?
- Both the Book of Acts and the Book of Revelation, where two of our readings came from today were written in the context of a struggling and often persecuted Church, which was small in numbers and would not have been seen as outwardly successful, certainly not powerful.
  - Rome and Caesar were surely much greater and surely Caesar was a much better candidate for Lord of all the earth than Jesus? In fact that was the title he gave himself on occasion. He had conquered what Romans considered to be the whole of the earth that mattered.
- And yet Christians, Luke, John the Divine and many others persisted in giving Caesar's titles to Jesus.
- Are there any parallels with the situation the Church finds itself in today?
  - Waning in power, largely ignored by many people, but still believing despite all the horrible things that go on in the world that Jesus is Lord of all and King of Kings and one day this Kingdom will be fully his kingdom.
- Of course we are looking for a new kind of Kingdom based on Peace rather than Power,
  - where judgement and the consequence of sin is taken seriously and we have been given the authority to pronounce forgiveness for those who repent,
  - where we are given confidence to open those locked doors and walk into the lions' den and face those who decry faith and do not doubt they are right and we are empowered to speak the truth and offer a different way of looking at the world, the risen King Jesus' way.
  - And a kingdom where we are invited to meet the suffering of the world like Thomas did, putting our hand into the hand of the wounded and dispossessed and seeing the eyes of Jesus within them.
- We do this now because Jesus has come close and breathed on us and we have received his Holy Spirit which does not allow us to sit still, but as with Peter and John and the disciples in Acts to be visibly Christian in the marketplaces of the world. To bring the new creation into the wounded and sinful world in which we live.
- So perhaps the question to take away is this, 'If there were a few verses in the Book of Acts written about you, a disciple of the Lord, what would those verses say?' Where would you be? Who would you speak to? And would the verses be able to say that your faith was clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?