

**Sermon preached by Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's
Wimbledon, 2nd Sunday of Easter, 23.04.17**

Today I want us to think about what it means to be *REAL*. In our reading from John's Gospel we heard how the disciples knew that Jesus had risen from the dead and had come back to them. They had seen him and knew he was *REAL*. But Thomas, one of the disciples, had not seen Jesus. He did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive. Thomas said that unless he saw the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands, and put his finger in the mark of the nails, and his hand in Jesus' side he would not believe! Strong words.

So how do we know what is *REAL* and what is *VIRTUAL REALITY*? Nowadays young people are immersed in social media; their phones are their life-line. No longer is the most important thing to have face to face contact with friends to have *REAL* live conversations. Of course there are many positive ways that we can use technology. How marvellous that we can link up with friends or family thousands of miles away and not only hear their voices but see them on a screen. Because we can see members of our family, and hear their voices, we know they are *REAL*, even though they may be many miles away. We love them and they love us even when we cannot see each other.

So we know something is *REAL* because we believe it. I'd like to read you part of a story called '*The Velveteen Rabbit*' that was written a long time ago, in 1922, by Margery Williams.* I think it helps us understand what it means to be *REAL*. The story starts in a nursery when the children have gone to bed and the toys are talking to one another. Rather like an old fashioned version of *Toy Story*!

"... The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the other toys.

He was so old that his brown coat was bald patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by and by break their main springs and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side-by-side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy

the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for view was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have to be carefully kept have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. erallyGenerallyGenerally Generally, Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things do not matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who do not understand."

"I suppose you are Real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. One you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.

"The Rabbit sighed. He though it would be a long time before this magic called Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like, and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him"....

And the boy that owned the Rabbit did love him so much that over the years the rabbit's fur became thin; his nose became shiny and his joints became loose. The rabbit then understood what the Skin horse had said about becoming REAL. The rabbit remember too what the

Skin horse had said that becoming *REAL* could be a painful process but once you were *REAL* you could not become *UNREAL* again.

That is what love is. If you love some one greatly then you are willing to suffer pain for them. We know something is *REAL* because we believe it for ourselves. The process of Jesus becoming *REAL* to his disciples was very painful.

Yes we know that Jesus died a very painful death on Good Friday. Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for his friends, for his disciples and for all people , to show them how much God loved them . All people includes you and me. Jesus died, was buried and after three days, he became alive again, he rose from the Dead.

Now some of his disciples believed that Jesus had come back to them and some did not. Thomas was one of the people who did not believe in Jesus' Resurrection from the dead on Easter Day. But a week later, when the disciples were meeting together, Thomas was with them. Jesus came and stood among them and told Thomas to touch him. Jesus said to Thomas,.. *'do not doubt but believe... (John 20: 27b)*.

There is a very powerful picture by Carravagio in the National Gallery depicting this scene. Some of you may have seen it.

Thomas was so amazed at Jesus' appearance and his words that he replied to Jesus: ... *'My Lord and my God...'* (John 20: 28). We can imagine Thomas

falling to his knees in adoration. Because Thomas had seen Jesus in front of him believed that he was alive, he knew he was *REAL*.

All of us here today and all Christians around the world are called to believe that Jesus died and rose again from the dead. Otherwise we would not be here today, our faith would not be *REAL*. Jesus said to Thomas, ... *'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'...* (John 20:29). That means you and me and all Christians.

We believe because we know within ourselves the truth of the Gospel stories regarding Jesus' Resurrection from the dead. That is why we meet Sunday by Sunday to celebrate this service of Holy Communion. We meet once again with Jesus as we share the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

We meet to rejoice that through Jesus' resurrection he conquered death and gave us new life and hope for the future. We have to hold onto this hope even when we are in a dark place, or when the troubles of the world, that we hear about in the news day by day, get too much for us to bear.

We have to hold onto this hope when we hear of the persecution of Christians around the world, e.g. of the bombing of Coptic Christian churches in Egypt. We pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters that they will have the courage to stand firm in their faith. That they will come triumph over their crucifixion experiences and come through to resurrection living. We have to hold onto the hope that good will triumph over evil.

The 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich leaves us these words of hope and encouragement:

"... Because of our good Lord's tender love to all those who shall be saved, he quickly comforts them, saying. 'The cause of all this pain is sin.' But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well...."

St .Paul knew only too well what it was to be persecuted and, imprisoned and his words in his letter to the Romans help us to hold onto the hope that good will triumph over evil:

"...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or the sword.....No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present , nor things to come, nor powers , nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord...."
(Romans 8:35;37-39)

That is REAL faith.

So let us rejoice this Easter season that Our Lord Jesus Christ conquered death as we say, *Christ is risen, he is risen indeed , Alleluia. Amen.*

**"The Velveteen Rabbit Or How toys Become Real,"* by Margery Williams, Heinemann, 1922.

