

Eve of St Thomas

2nd July 2017

Place: St Mary's

Isaiah 35

Theme: Living by faith

Heb 10.35-11.1

- ◆ The writer to the Hebrews quotes the prophet Habakkuk in our second reading today when he says 'my righteous one will live by faith.' It comes from a prophecy by the prophet Habakkuk which is alluded to in several places in the New Testament. It was an important text for the early church.
- ◆ Tomorrow is the feast of St Thomas, who has been associated with issues of doubt and faith since the writing of John's Gospel. In John's Gospel Thomas represents both doubt and faith. He represents doubt because he doubts the accounts of the resurrection that he hears from the other disciples when they tell him about Jesus appearing to them in the upper room on Easter Day; when Thomas is absent. He also represents the ultimate profession of faith. John gospel reaches its climax with Thomas's declaration when he does encounter the Risen Christ 'My Lord and my God'. In John's gospel Thomas represents the struggles each of us has with faith. Who does not find the claims of the church that Christ is risen incredible when they first hear them? Thomas's later encounter with the risen Christ tells us that such doubts will not prevent us from experiencing the resurrection for

ourselves, but how blessed are those who believe without having had such an encounter.

- ◆ Our readings today explore what faith is further. Christian faith often gets reduced to believing a set of incredible assertions; but our readings this evening show us that faith is much more complex and mysterious than this. Christian faith is not just agreeing with ideas in our heads which this sort of fact based understanding suggests. Christian faith the writer to the Hebrews tells us is something to live by.
- ◆ What does it mean to live by faith? How do we do that? The writer to the Hebrews goes on to tell us that God does not like those who shrink back, they will be lost. This suggests that faith has something to do with courage. Faith is also about a certain attitude to the future. ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’
- ◆ Faith is a trust in God and God’s power to redeem. Even after Thomas met the resurrected Christ he needed faith. The significance of the resurrection is not that 2000 years ago a group of friends met a man that they had seen executed, after he had died. That would be an extraordinary story, but it would not necessarily make any difference to the way we live our lives today. The resurrection is important for us because it tells us about how God acts in the world and how God is going to act in the future.

For the early Church, the significance of the Resurrection was that it was a foretaste of what God is going to do to redeem the world. The resurrection is both a sign and means by which we can be assured that God's goodness is greater than all that is damaging and destructive in the world. The resurrection is the demonstration and promise that God's love is more powerful than death. The resurrection teaches us that while we are powerless in the face of Death, God is stronger than death and having brought Jesus Christ through its deep waters, he will also bring us through too.

- ◆ Faith means living our lives trusting that it is true. This gives us courage, because we know that God is on our side and God is greater than any foe that we can face. It means we persevere when things are difficult, because we trust that God will bring us through these difficulties to his Kingdom. It means that we have hope because we are not relying on our own resources to get us through but on the grace of God.
- ◆ In our Old Testament reading Isaiah has a vision of the desert transformed by the coming of abundant water. The image is one of joy, hope and liveliness. It is an image of what it is like to live with the faith the Holy Spirit gives in our lives. Without faith we are like the desert, dry, inhospitable, incapable of sustaining anything more than the most meagre existence. When the

grace of the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of faith it is like water coming to the desert. The whole landscape of our lives is transformed. Things blossom which had long been dormant, beauty and power flow into our lives. It is an awesome thing, the power of this transformation can be terrifying, but with faith we can be strong and not be afraid of the changes God is bringing to our lives. We will start to see and hear the world in a new way; seeing and hearing God with us in it. We will be able to move and speak in a new way, we will discover joy. All that was dry and barren and desolate will become lush and green, fertile and hospitable.

- ◆ Such is the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace it brings that we cannot get lost once we have it, no matter what dunces we are. Which I have to say I find very reassuring. Isaiah tells us ‘no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.’ We will be protected from wild and ferocious beasts and we shall come home to God. We will come home to great joy and everlasting joy and grief and sorry shall leave us for ever.
- ◆ This is what it means to live by faith. It is wonderful, it is powerful, it is transforming and it is a great grace. It is as great a grace as Thomas had when he met the risen Christ having said ‘Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ This

grace is there for us if we ask for it. Pray for the Holy Spirit to come to you. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you faith. Open your heart and let the grace flood in.