Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1: 3-9; John 20: 19-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I was scrolling through past Easter sermons yesterday, and I realised there was a gap back at Easter 2017. Which was of course the period of sick leave while I was waiting for my hip replacement.

Since that operation, way back in June 2017, I have mostly worn a step counter. Because my consultant told me to pay no attention to the exercises other people might insist on, but simply to walk. And many are the days when I don’t get to 10000 steps – like, most Saturdays, when I spend the day at the desk writing sermons and preparing other stuff; but I am nevertheless strangely conscious of my activity levels – and more motivated to move – when I am wearing the step counter than when I’m not. In fact I got a new one just recently, because the old one gave up working …

Looking for a fairly basic one – because I am a fairly basic sort of exerciser – I was struck by how sophisticated many of them are. This one isn’t sophisticated; though it still does a bit more than the first one did: I find myself watching as it beats my heart rate before it pronounces the number – and the average rate, and the maximum rate over the course of the day. And I become conscious of my breathing.

And I went from there to thinking about breathing, and how ventilators and breathing and oxygen are all such key factors in today’s life. It was said early on that when you wake up in the morning, if you can take a breath, hold it for a count of ten and then breath out – all without coughing, then you haven’t got it. And some mornings when I have felt a bit more anxious than other mornings, I have caught myself doing just that.

Because one antidote to anxiety is breathing: steady, slow, measured breaths. Which are not a luxury until you can’t do them. And I guess that takes in all of you who are asthmatic or have asthmatic children or other lung conditions: you know how it feels to struggle with breath. Being aware of our breathing makes us more ‘present’ to what is going on, more focused on what is immediately in front of us, cutting out whatever is not important in that moment.

It was no accident this morning that we sang Breath on me, breath of God at the beginning of the service either. We have heard of the Holy Spirit’s association with ‘breath’ before, of course: we hear it today in the story of Jesus breathing on his disciples as he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel. And this story will come back round in one form or another in a very few weeks when we get to Pentecost.

But then there was the reference too in the first hymn: Love that formed and named us, filled this clay with breath, which goes back to the creation story of Adam being made and animated by God.

So breathing is something we take for granted. Until we can’t. And of course we can’t help but remember the pictures we have all seen on the news, of people in hospitals up and down the country, with systems that are compromised by COVID 19. When every laboured breath becomes a prayer that this suffering might, one way or another, be relieved.

So maybe that is my first question this morning: if, instead of fretting about breathing in virus, we think about what it means to be breathed-into by Jesus. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. How is that thought going to impact on our thoughts and actions in the coming week?

I have said before how much I love Thomas and his doubts. He is elsewhere referred to as the Twin. If he is a twin then we are sort of his other half – he is Everyman (or woman, obviously); he speaks for us.

And there is a point here when you can believe that Thomas is not only doubting but jolly cross: that language of doubt is also quite violent – UNLESS I put my finger into the nail mark and my hand in that hole in his side, I won’t believe. More than that in some translations: I will never believe.

And we can understand his anger – he is bitterly disappointed in Jesus; the Jesus who has just gone on what was effectively a suicide mission into Jerusalem, when we could all see what was going to happen if he did. That being the case, Thomas has just spent three futile years following a man he thought was going to take power and control from the oppressive regime and show who was king. Yet he turned out to be hell-bent on getting himself killed.

Thomas was justifiably hacked-off. Maybe so hacked-off that he couldn’t face that first Sunday evening, which was why he wasn’t there when Jesus made his first appearance. It’s an explanation as likely as any other.

So here’s Thomas in a strop; and then we notice that he doesn’t drag himself out of it – Jesus defuses the strop - it is Jesus who returns a week later and says: Peace be with you – put your fingers here and your hand here, and believe.

It is powerful stuff: Jesus, who has already offered himself: through the Last Supper, through bread and wine, through the washing of the disciples’ feet, through his crucifixion, and even by coming to them in his risen state, and now here he has to offer himself yet again – to give his body to Thomas in order for Thomas to convince himself and to come to belief.

You have heard me talk about Julian of Norwich before: a very ordinary woman who had an extraordinary set of sixteen visions of Christ. And in one of those visions, the Lord comes to her and says, effectively: is there anything more I can do for you? It’s a bit like this now with Thomas – Jesus has done all of this for him and for all of us, yet he still wants more, and Jesus is ready and willing to give it. And the same is true today.

Thomas does then have a real experience of Jesus that then takes him to the ultimate statement of belief: My Lord and my God.

It has been suggested that this 20th chapter of John’s gospel was the final one and the following chapter was an addition at some stage. That is indicated by the last few words of the reading: Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book … and so on.

If that is the case, then this pronouncement of Thomas’ represents in fact the last words spoken by a disciple before the baton is handed on to us.

It is only a week since Easter, though in some ways it feels longer. What more can Jesus do for you? What do you need from him now, in order that he can send you as the Father sent him?

**Amen**