

Inward strength

Second Sunday of Easter, 7th April 2024, 8.30am Holy Communion

Reading [John 20.19–end](#)

Last week saw the birthday of AC Grayling, philosopher and educational entrepreneur. You need to know about Prof Grayling because he thinks those of you parents and young people who are interested in a faith school, now or in the future, are headed into a dangerous place. In an [article for the Independent](#) a few years ago, he said

A single moment's thought shows that the expression "faith school" is a contradiction: education should be about how to think, not what to think... For note what 'faith' means: it means believing without evidence or reason; this intellectual irresponsibility is regarded as a religious virtue, as the story of Doubting Thomas is intended to illustrate.

Well. How intellectually irresponsible are you feeling this morning? Does that sound like what you are doing, believing without evidence or reason? How many thoughtful believers has Professor Grayling listened to? And has he read anything on John's gospel since his scripture lessons in the 'fifties? Because this is not Thomas' problem.

Thomas is not at a seminar on evidence for life after death. Jesus is - was - his friend. If Thomas wants evidence, it's evidence that the person his fellow disciples have seen is the same person who was put to death on the cross. It's the identity of the person, more than the believability of the event, that concerns him.

Anyhow, John says that Thomas gets what he says he needs, but Jesus says that there's no future in it: the people who are really blessed – really on the right path – are the ones who will believe without that kind of evidence.

And that's us. Or it can be.

John says that, on the night Thomas is away, Jesus appears to the disciples, breathes on them and says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. Before long, Jesus won't be with them as he was before his death, or as he is now in these amazing Easter encounters. And that sounds like bad news, because he has been the

presence of God made flesh among them. But it isn't. He breathes his Spirit into them, so from now they will have the presence of God inside them, in their hearts.

The vivid Easter experiences, that sense of being encountered from beyond, is only a temporary thing: it is just a first stage that launches the rocket of Christian faith. Thereafter, the fuel is to come from inside: God won't grab them from the outside but breathe their life within them.

From those days until these, a mark of grown-up faith has been when men and women and young people have found they don't have to depend only on what or who is around them, because of the strength of God within them. Isaiah the prophet calls it 'the Spirit of inward strength', and it is something the world needs, because without it you are a prisoner of circumstance: your wellbeing is defined by what is around you, and that can lead you into a dangerous place.

It can lead to people trying to create around them what they hope will create wellbeing within them. I guess that is what's going on in the rather sad materialism we see in a city like ours and an area such as this.

The Spirit of inward strength. It doesn't make the bad stuff (and there's plenty of it) go away. But it gives you the strength to say, Nevertheless. Yes, suffering is real, death is real; yes, people let each other down, but nevertheless, we have reason to rejoice. And we can find the reasons for that here.

Here, in the word of scripture, we can feel the breath of Jesus, offering us the Holy Spirit, as his friends did. Here, in the breaking of the bread, we take his life into our own, as his friends did in that locked room.

We don't have to be complete victims of circumstance, we can even help change circumstances for others, if there is a toughness among us and within us, the Spirit of inward strength that Jesus offers his friends. That's what it means, as John says, to 'have life in his name'.