

A Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on the 2nd Sunday of Easter 2018. Acts 4: 32-37; Jn 20: 19-end

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I pricked my ears up on Friday morning

at an item on the news.

It was a report on *The Today Programme* –

a report covering the UN Security Council debate on Thursday night –

the debate which centred

on alleged Russian involvement

in the chemical attack on Sergei and Yulia Scripal.

As I listened to that report

a word I kept hearing was 'belief'.

Rather incongruously, given the seriousness of the subject matter,

there was a good deal of reference to *Alice in Wonderland*.

You may have heard it too.

Vaselina Bensia, the Russian Ambassador to the UN,

read out a whole passage from *Alice in Wonderland* –

a passage about verdicts being reached before trials.

Karen Pierce, the British Ambassador,

hit back with a line from the Queen of Hearts:

“Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”.

In our Gospel this morning,

Thomas is asked to believe

not 'six impossible things',

but one 'impossible thing'.

Thomas is asked to believe

in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And, of course, he can't believe it –

at least not initially.

Thomas wasn't there

when Christ appeared to his disciples the first time.

And he needs more to convince him

than the disciples' words alone.

Thomas needs evidence -

he needs action –

he needs to be able to see and to touch for himself.

And Thomas, remarkably,

gets what he's asked for.

Thomas is offered the chance, a week later,

to do all the things

he says he needs to do.

And so it is that Thomas believes.

John ends that passage –

with what I always think

is a rather confusing punchline:

'Have you believed because you have seen me?'

'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'.

Is Thomas being criticised because he needed to see for himself,

or does Christ want him to focus on the second

of those two sentences:

'blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe?'

For we, of course, are among those

who have not seen.

The truth is we don't know.

John leaves us – as Jesus leaves Thomas –

with something to think about it.

We'll come back to Thomas at the end.

The Book of Acts -

the book from which all our first readings come

during Eastertide –

The Book of Acts is a sort of diary – a sort of report –

about how ‘those who have not seen’ come to believe.

It’s a report of the beginning

of the life of the Early Church.

It’s a report on how ‘those who *have* seen’ –

Jesus’ first disciples, those who were with Thomas in the upper room –

how ‘those who have seen’

proclaim the Good News

to ‘those who have not seen’.

Acts is the story of how faith in Jesus Christ begins to reach a wider audience.

What is so striking, especially for us as we read it, it seems to me

is that the new recruits to Christianity -

are brought to believe not only through the words

but also the through actions of Jesus’ first disciples.

Words and actions.

That passage from Acts that Geoff read to us

Doesn’t give any details about what the disciples said by way of ‘testimony’,

it gives details about how they lived.

How the first Christians lived

was something the author of Acts

thought was worth recording.

He – or she - thought it was worth recording, I presume,

because how the first Christians lived

should serve as an example for how today’s Christians should live.

Acts is written, not least, as a manual for those who would come after – in other words, for us.

The way we live as Christians has the potential to draw others to faith.

It also has the potential to destroy faith.

Our example has the potential to disillusion and disappoint –
the potential to create distrust.

Was the apostles 'testimony'
as the author of Acts referred to it in that passage
a testimony in words or in actions?
I'd like to think it was both.

If words and actions don't tally,
What we're left with is a problem.

That was evident in the Security Council debate on Thursday night.
Britain was accused of fabricating intelligence,
an accusation which of course has some grounding
in the history of the then Government's supposed justification
for going to war in Iraq.

The British Ambassador said
she would not take lectures from a country
which had blocked investigations into the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Both Ambassadors
drew on the evidence of past actions
to justify their words.
Each referred to past actions
cast doubt on what the other was saying.

The question it boils down to is who can be trusted?

One of the tragedies of recent years, it seems to me,
is the difficulty we have these days
in knowing whom we can trust.

British society suffers, surely, from a growing loss of faith –
a loss of faith not just in God,
but a loss faith in institutions and individuals
we used to think we could trust.

Amongst those institutions is the Church –
and by 'Church' I mean the whole Church,
not just our local church here.

People who sit outside the Church,
are put off the Church, I often think,
because of the lack of integrity – the lack of apparent trustworthiness –
they perceive in the Church as an institution.

They also, let's face it –
are wont to see the same lack of integrity
displayed by some of the Church's members.

Our words aren't always borne out by our actions.

That is true on a small scale and on an individual scale, and it is true on a grand scale and on a corporate scale.

An example is the whole horror of the revelations concerning clerical abuse.

Along with that runs the scandal of the Church's failures in relation to safeguarding.

There has been, we now know, a screaming disparity
between words and actions –
the words and actions especially of those of us in positions of trust.

That disparity has put paid to many people's Christian faith.

Their faith in Jesus Christ
whom Church people claim to follow.

Here's a brief plug for an event
that is publicised in this week's bulletin.

Caroline our Parish Safeguarding Officer and I met this last week
with members of the safeguarding team from the Diocese.

They've agreed to run a training event for us on the evening of 8 May.

They're doing that to help us get up to speed with current safeguarding guidelines.

That event is open to all of us

and I would really encourage as many of us as can make it

to come along.

It's there particularly

for anybody who helps out in any way – however occasionally –

with anything that goes on in the name of our church –

any of our events and activities.

But safeguarding is the responsibility of all of,

so the more of us who are up to speed the better.

We are trying to get ourselves as a church

to a point where our actions –

our actions in inviting people to help with events

and making sure the necessary checks are in place for them and for ourselves -

match up with our words;

our words which speak of our faith in Jesus Christ -

speak of Christ as Son of God who took human life so seriously

he came to earth and lived among us,

sharer of our flesh and carer for all that it means to be a human being.

Back to Thomas – and then I'll finish.

Did you notice what day of the week it was when Christ appeared to him?

The disciples met, John tells us, the first time,

'when it was evening, on the first day of the week'.

Then, 'a week later', John writes –

so again, 'on the first day of the week' –

they met again,

and this time Thomas was with them.

And what were the disciples doing when they gathered?

We find the answer to that in the Book of Acts.

The disciples did – surely - what Christ's disciples have always done

on the first day of the week

in response to our Lord's command.

They gathered together – they met - in Christ's name -

they met for fellowship,

and they met to break bread.

And in the breaking of bread,

Christ is there amongst them.

'Where or two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'.

Christ words and actions are in perfect harmony.

What Christ has said, he goes on to do.

Christ 'the Word' never breaks his word.

He did that then, and he does that now.

For we also gather

on the first day of the week –

we gather for fellowship,

and we gather to break bread.

Into this place too the risen Christ steps,

speaking words of pardon and peace.

May he equip us to speak those words to the world.

May our actions match our words,

and may we speak and act with integrity and truth.

Amen.