

Sermon presented by Br. Clark Berge

Sunday, April 15, 2012

St. Philip's Church, Annerley, Brisbane, Australia.

It is a great pleasure to be here once again! I've had a good year, full of comings and goings, racking up the airmiles. But the wonderful thing has been to spend time with the brothers in all our provinces, sharing in the common life and work of each friary. Sometimes people ask: is that all you do? Yes, that is pretty much it. But it is no small thing. I don't mean the work is hard or heavy, or that I deserve special praise or recognition for it. But that theologically speaking I can't think of anything more important to our Easter witness, this week and throughout the year, than sharing the ups and downs of life. It is what ALL of us are called to do. The arena for the drama of salvation is very much daily life. When we get that, it is easy to see why the image of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead as we see him today is so important.

Today we see all the troubles and struggles of life vindicated. We see the resurrected Jesus standing in the midst of his disciples, showing them his wounded hands and side and saying "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This is the image of heaven and earth joined together: Jesus is the new Temple, destroyed and rebuilt in three days, as he predicted.

Today we celebrate the charter of how Jesus's followers are to live and work in the world: empowered by the Holy Spirit we carry on Jesus's work and ministry.

Baptized into Christ we become temples of the Holy Spirit, we are the meeting place of heaven and earth.

So we share life's ups and downs by faith in the living Christ. Daily life becomes the way we evangelize, the way we share the Good News. It's about overcoming the dualistic thinking that church and world are somehow separate. We are called to be with people in the closed dark places where they huddle in fear. That's both metaphorically and physically too. Often I come across a brother, his eyes owly, body stiff with anxiety: he's got a bill too big to pay, a diagnosis too frightening to think about, an interpersonal conflict too painful to know how to work through. This is real life, where God meets us, where God asks us to work with him. "Receive the Holy Spirit" Jesus says so we can be there for each other. I've never had to cower behind a door waiting for armed men to storm through, but it would be my everlasting shame if I were to run away from such a predicament. And it isn't such a far-fetched scenario—violence seems to be erupting in places all over the globe. It may be just a matter of time before I catch up with it.

We follow Jesus's example by pursuing our work non-violently: those pierced hands remind us our common cause can be painful, but as Jesus shows us today getting wounded is not the end of the story. I have a friend, perhaps known to some of you too, Michael Lapsely of the Society of Sacred Mission. He was wounded by a letter bomb in 1990, losing an eye and both hands. but he is not an angry victim: he has dedicated himself to peace and the healing of wounded survivors around the globe. As we resist the temptation to fight or to take up arms against evil, maybe even more challengingly we also work to equip ourselves to resist the temptation to harm each

other with the hasty retort or angry gesture—the homely violence Franciscan brothers perpetuate on each other. And sadly I see that too. I’m even the perpetrator from time to time I am sorry to say. However, gathering around the Resurrected Christ we faithfully ask for forgiveness and participate something much more durable, more beautiful by far: God’s kingdom in our midst.

Tom Wright in his book *Simply Jesus* has a beautiful description of God’s kingdom which is firmly established among us: he describes faithful people starting a ministry to help people dying, which became a world-wide hospice ministry; people seeing that there is no food pantry in their community so opening one in their parish. After reading Wright’s book, I thought of my father pushing the parish council to share in an ecumenical work to provide cooked meals in our small farming community in Snohomish, Washington. (You’d be surprised how many hungry people there are in small farming towns in the USA.) You see it is particular people in particular places who do the work of the kingdom of God. The work of the kingdom is healing the sick and wounded, comforting the dying, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. It is in no way vague or theoretical.

I share in this kingdom work among the SSF brothers, shadowing them as they work as hospital chaplains, in schools and parishes, equipping themselves as musicians, attending ecumenical meetings, even pouring tea and planting gardens—a cocoa plantation in Papua New Guinea, cassava and kumara gardens in the Solomon Islands; I attended an Occupy Wall Street protest in New York in December, barely resisting the temptation to get arrested—only holding back because I’d only just met up with the protesters, having no background in the particular issues they were

addressing. All of these are kingdom activities because they are ways the brothers have found to share in the work of resisting the evil that says life is meaningless, ordinary people don't count, or that the environment is not an important concern for Christians .

So, my friends, as you think about your faith (and who doesn't with the example of St. Thomas amplifying our own doubts and reservations, the niggling questions that challenge us), remember that this is the real thing. Our stumbling, halting, tentative path is no different from the first disciples' path. The thing they understood so quickly and passed onto the Church, is that we can't follow this way all by ourselves. We do it with other people. The first disciples, as we hear in the Act of the Apostles today, even went so far as to sell their property in order to share with each other. We need each other in order to do the work God has given us to do.

And as John shows us Jesus standing among the disciples and greeting Thomas, he gives us a final bit of encouragement: "In his disciples' presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life."

In other words: John's gospel account is just the beginning! The story has continued to unfold down through the ages. It is now being told throughout the world through the faithful living of millions of men and women: daily life, faithfully engaged, demonstrating the power of God active in the world, making all things new.