

11/04/21 – Second Sunday of Easter

Preacher: Jane Quinton, Curate

(John 20: 19-31) – ‘Time is in our hands!’

(PROP: fob watch)

Now, I haven't suddenly mistaken church for an episode of 'The Antiques Roadshow' this morning!

But I would like to begin by showing you this old fob watch..... it's the watch that my grandfather gave to my Dad, and which my dad has now passed on to his grandson (my nephew).

And I think that any watch or clock is quite a poignant gift to pass on to others, reminding us of the reality of time and all that that encompasses..... a reminder that time doesn't stand still; that it can be short; that every second of the day can deliver something new and different; and that, although in our hands, it is a precious gift that we have been given.....

And I'm hoping this visual image will help us with this morning's gospel reading..... that it will help explain what Jesus was telling His disciples, and to recognise the precious gift that God has given us.....

7 days have now passed since we were celebrating Easter Sunday – the day when the pain and darkness of Good Friday was eclipsed by the joy and new life of Jesus's resurrection – that momentous 'first day of the week', as all the gospel writers refer to it. A description that I believe has deeper and underlying connotations, because it points us back to the beginning of time itself; where, as we read in Genesis, out of darkness and chaos God's wind and word, brought light and life – and the first day of Creation.....

Something which was indeed 'good', but that unfortunately did not last....as through Adam and his disobedience, sin then came into the world bringing separation between us (humankind) and God.

Thankfully, God loves us far too much for that to be the end though..... And He had a plan ... a plan of reconciliation and restoration ... of forgiveness and a new beginning..... a plan that, as we remembered and celebrated last week, was accomplished through Jesus Christ, God's Son - 'the new and last Adam', as Paul describes Jesus in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:45) ...whose love and obedience to God the Father, and unconditional and sacrificial love for us, culminating in His death on the cross for our sins and subsequent resurrection, achieved the defeat over death and eternal separation from God, and began the new work of God's kingdom of heaven here on earth...

A new work which, as Jesus tells His disciples in today's reading, He has left His church to

implement: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v 21)

And Jesus came to bring forgiveness...

How often do we read of Jesus forgiving the sins of those who came to be healed, before then healing their illness? It was what alienated Him from the pharisees and scribes, who knew that

only God has the power to forgive our sins. Indeed, whilst John the Baptist brought a message of repentance – of a need to recognize our sinfulness and repent of our sins - John's message

only paved the way for Jesus, who actually paid the ultimate price of that forgiveness (forgiving even those who had put Him there!)

Love and forgiveness go hand in hand in God's new creation – for 'in Christ there is no condemnation' (Rom 8:1). As we see in our reading today, even though Jesus's disciples were all guilty of betraying and abandoning Him before His crucifixion, when He meets them for the first time after His resurrection His greeting encompasses love and forgiveness.... Not only is there no condemnation but His first words to them are the Jewish greeting of 'shalom', a blessing that 'God may give you every good thing' - peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, tranquility...Yes, even in our despair and fear and guilt this is how Jesus wants to welcome all of us – with a message of peace and forgiveness and love.....

However, there is then a command for His friends: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..... (v 21) This beautiful watch was designed and created by a watchmaker, but it has then been the responsibility of first my grandfather, then my father, and now my nephew, to keep it wound up and working.

Similarly Jesus, by His death and resurrection, has now achieved forgiveness for the whole world.....through Jesus every single person on this earth has the chance to start afresh, with a clean slate, all our sins forgiven and forgotten, able to live in peace and unity with God, and with each other.....This is the beautiful new creation that God, the ultimate watch maker, has created.....But God has given His church the responsibility of implementing Jesus's message of forgiveness...."As the Father has sent me, so I send you....."Not only are we to tell people of the wonderful good news but we are to live it out as well.....because most of us are like Thomas – and will only believe when we see the result of forgiveness right in front of us! And the result of God's forgiveness is life-changing.

Jesus came to set us free – from all that binds us and keeps us from being able to live a life in all its fulness. And unforgiveness is divisive, a 2-way trap that binds both parties.....because unforgiveness leads to resentment and bitterness..... forgiveness breaks those chains..... "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..... (v 21) Then Jesus breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (v 22-23) Yes! Jesus brought a message of forgiveness that He then asked His church to implement, and thankfully He gave us the Holy Spirit to help us with the task!

One of the best examples of this is the story of Dutch Christian Corrie Ten Boom, a watchmaker in fact, who, during the second world war hid Dutch Jews from the Nazis. Unfortunately she and her family were caught doing this and sent to the concentration camp in Ravensbruck. Although Corrie miraculously survived, her sister Betsie was killed there. But when Corrie came out she began travelling around the world, telling her story, of God's forgiveness of sins, and of the need for people to forgive those who had harmed them.

However in 1947 Corrie herself was put to the test while speaking in a Munich church. At the close of the service, a balding man in a gray overcoat stepped forward

to greet her. Corrie froze. She knew this man well; he'd been one of the most vicious guards at Ravensbrück, one who had mocked the women prisoners as they showered. "It came back with a rush," she wrote, "the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man." And now he was pushing his hand out to shake hers, and saying: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course — how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze. "You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there... But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein" — again the hand came out — "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there — I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven — and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? The soldier stood there expectantly, waiting for Corrie to shake his hand. "I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us." Standing there before the former S.S. man, Corrie remembered that forgiveness is an act of the will — not an emotion. "Jesus, help me!" she prayed. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

So Corrie thrust out her hand. "And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart." For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit." "As the Father has sent me, so I send you....." Unfortunately I have to admit that this watch is not used. It is kept in this box in a drawer. It's beauty and what is was created for is hidden.....Forgiveness is the timeless gift that Jesus offers us all – that changes lives..... It is a precious gift that is to be shared..... If there are people in our lives who we need to forgive, let us ask God's Holy Spirit to help us today – now is the time, let us not fob it off it any longer!

AMEN