



Easter 1

THE NEW SHOFAR

The Church as the reconstituted Israel

Christ's resurrection is to be lived and celebrated

Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord

A focus for Luke throughout the whole of the Book of Acts is the way the Israel of old is now reconstituted in the Christian community. This helps explain why so much of the early action takes place in Jerusalem, and more particularly, in and around the Temple. It was their new “home” and so in Acts the evangelist assures Christians that they are the inheritors of all of the promises Yahweh had made to Israel in the past. They were not a new religion. Not a new people. They were the reconstituted people of Israel, reconstituted in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

One of the fascination features of today’s text is the way in which many people seemed to be attracted to the Apostles and those early followers. They held them in *high esteem* but were not yet willing to join. Their message was a comfort, a source of hope and life but in reality it was still demanding a great deal from those Jews in the Holy City. There was a cost associated with discipleship. It would only be through a deep faith in the Risen Christ they could sustain any kind of renewed life.

Despite the difficulties and the demands; despite the threats that would have come to those setting out to join this tiny group of “heretics” ... *Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women*. This increase in numbers is due to the actions of God. Note the use of the passive here. The closer the disciples lived lives imitating Christ and obeying his teachings the more God added to their number – *a question*: does the reverse perhaps suggest that if numbers are in decline (as they are across Australia) there is a question about our faithfulness?

They were all together...

No one reading Acts could miss the crucial message of unity. Being One in Christ, One in the Spirit is what constitutes the Church. This unity in all things is what made them stand out. They *all* gathered for prayer, *all* shared what they had, *all* cared for the poor and the needy. *All* gave a living witness to the Kingdom of God in the Risen and Ascended Christ. The message: It is only when this unity is absolute will the wider world be forced to sit back and take notice. This Christ-character truly does bring people together, truly does bring about a transformation of the human community.

It was out of this Body of Christ the power of the Spirit became obvious. It was manifested in the many signs and wonders worked by the Apostles. This is what happens when a community is ***God focussed, Jesus modelled*** and ***Spirit led***. Note how our text ends. Not only did they heal the many who were sick but went into battle with demonic forces and defeated them. The kind of deeds people had witnessed at the hands of Jesus were now evident in these believers. In fact, there was not much of a battle going on! All they needed to do was to place the sick along the side of the road so that Peter’s shadow could fall on them. The shadow was an attempt at conveying the simple message: God works in and through those who live out the Gospel with a steadfastness of faith and hope.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

Thomas the doubter – his struggle is our struggle

Thomas reflects the situation of many people at the time. They have been willing to believe in Jesus because of the signs he works but then refuse to believe without signs, when tough and challenging times came their way. His point is clear. Faith grows into what the evangelist understands to be *discipleship* or it is not a genuine faith. The disciples are still living as one and Jesus returns to greet them on the Sunday after his earlier appearance, a model for what Christians do every Sunday since.

Scepticism on the part of the disciples is known through the Synoptic Gospels and in the present story, Thomas is a reflection on that collective doubting. Earlier in the Gospel Thomas had shown a passionate commitment to Jesus as well as some uncertainty about what was really going on with the talk about *returning to the Father*. In this Gospel faith is presented as being a journey, a struggle. This struggle to sustain a living faith is one that remains an ongoing whole-of-life challenge. It needs to be fed, nurtured and exercised throughout one's journey or it fades and becomes notional.

Another thing the evangelist is doing is leading his readers to the ultimate declaration of Jesus: there is a special blessing for those who believe without having the gift of physically *seeing* the Risen Jesus. He acknowledges this is tough, especially after two thousand years. There is no lessening the challenge.

This is our faith, this is the faith of the Church

Nothing has changed in that little room and importantly the doors remain locked when Jesus appears in front of them with the familiar greeting *peace be with you*. Jesus shows Thomas his wounds and in so doing challenges this disciple to see how the one standing in front of him is the same Jesus of Nazareth who was nailed to the cross and then buried in the grave as a dead man. The evidence is clear and if he wants to be sure all he has to do is feel the wounds for himself. It is now clear the other disciples had not imagined an appearance or had seen a ghost. Thomas is placed in a difficult situation because Jesus goes on to repeat his doubts as announced to the group of disciples.

Denial is now impossible and Thomas falls to his knees and proclaims his faith in the Lord Jesus who had risen from the dead. He is his Lord, his Rabbi, his Master but he is also Thomas' God. Thomas was able to believe because he had *seen*, a luxury given to but a few. Indeed, at various times throughout this Gospel we have seen examples of Jesus being highly critical of those who believed in him only because they had seen the signs he worked. When the miracles were no longer available, their faith waned. John's Church is populated by believers who had come to faith through the teaching, witness and preaching of the Apostles and this is the kind of faith that endures. They were not led to faith by signs, miracles and wonders. True faith requires a great deal more than just an acknowledgement of Jesus. It demands of the believer a recognition and celebration of his divinity.

It is an encouragement to the local community of the Church. The more we come together as Christians, the more we come into contact with the Living and Risen Christ in their midst. This is not just pointing to liturgical gatherings, or the forming of groups for times of worship. Christ is present in and through every gathering of believers. This serves as a reminder of the power and importance of the Sunday gathering for worship. These disciples were had come together on the Sunday, the day of the resurrection. There is a blessing given – *Peace be with you*. The Holy Spirit comes down upon the gathered believers and their sins are forgiven. Christ is present and reveals to them the marks of his crucifixion (this points to our Holy Communion service with the Body and Blood of Christ offered there on the altar) and the believers confess their faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God who died on the cross, rose from the grave and ascended into heaven where he rules at the Father's right hand. They are then sent out to live what they believe. This is the Sunday Mass as we have it today and as it was celebrated liturgically at the time of the writing of this Gospel. The same Christ is present with us and in us, forgiving our sins, filling us with the same Holy Spirit and sending us out as witnesses to the saving love of his Father. This is what John is celebrating in this Thomas narrative.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -
anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com