2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER – John 20:19-end - Acts 2:14a, 22-32

When I was at school and had to revise for a test or an exam, some of my friends would describe the ways in which they were going to revise. It ranged from learning until late at night, to getting up early in the morning, to even, as some might prefer, putting their books under their pillows at night, so that the information would transfer, as by magic, into their heads. And there may have been some who said they never revised but were lying. Sometimes, we would revise together, pushing each other on, as we recited the things we had to remember, so that we could reproduce them at the exam. I was never one for getting up earlier than I had to; I used to opt for the staying up late if necessary. But one thing was clear: putting your books under your pillow at night wouldn’t get the information into your head; that was a myth, of course! But how do we learn best? It seems that we all learn in one of several ways: reading, hearing, doing, or a combination of them. And the best way of learning – the one that secures the information the most, seems to be that of experience: the more we are ‘in’ and ‘into’ something, the more we retain the information. Learning, the gathering and storing of information, is something that we need to be active in, or it won’t happen, or not at best.

In today’s readings, the information that the message conveyed, was quite simple, and consisted of only 7 words: Jesus Christ has risen from the dead! But how people were taking it in, differed quite a lot. For most of them, the success of really hearing these 7 words, depended on their ability to listen and then to allow the message to seep into their understanding. For many, it didn’t happen overnight; they literally had to sleep on it. For Thomas, one of the twelve, it took more than just hearing the message: he also had to see it and touch it. John doesn’t record whether he actually reached out his hand and touched the risen Jesus as he had been invited. The fact that Jesus spoke so directly to him might have been enough at that very moment. But it’s true that, so often, we don’t accept what we cannot see or touch. That may well be the reason why so many people actually doubted the seriousness of the present pandemic: it was only rumour from abroad; it hadn’t really reached us, and therefore it wasn’t taken in as something real. Now, of course, it can no longer be denied: it has ‘touched’ us only too well!

Now seeing, hearing, and touching are very important in life. And as we cannot touch those outside our own homes, we may feel deprived in our human experience. The Church is a Body - and as such relies on touch for learning. The sacraments of the church are all to do with touch: baptism, anointing and laying on of hands for healing and commissioning, sharing the Peace and the body of Christ, welcoming and encouraging; it all depends on touch. Our fellowship is diminished now that we cannot share in this way. But let us not become discouraged. The most frequent instruction in the Bible is not ‘Be good; be holy, don’t sin, don’t lie’, but rather: ‘Don’t be afraid.’ The Bible says those former things too, but what it says most is: ‘Don’t be afraid.’ ‘Fear not’. Did you notice what Jesus says each time he appears in the Gospel for today? He says, ‘Peace be with you.’ He says it three times in this passage from John 20: Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Peace be with you.

‘Have you believed because you have seen me?’, says Jesus to Thomas, ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

We may not see each other or be able to touch now in the normal way church works, but we are still able to hear the living Word, Jesus Christ, as he speaks to us:

Do not be afraid. Fear not. Peace be with you. Open your Bible and read those words anew. Learn them. Believe them through the risen Lord. The Peace of the Lord be always with you. Amen.