

JOHN 20:19-31
TRANSFORMING INDIVIDUALS, TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

This week, I got and sent out latest the CHO newsletter from Cambodia; if you didn't get it or can't open it, there are some print copies around. This edition contains lots of stories from School on a Mat, which is just what it says on the tin; it is a plastic mat on the forest floor in a village with no school and the children come and are given basic literacy, number work, healthcare and safety, as well as Bible stories. This edition also has some stories from individual children and tells you their name, age and what is their ambition – to be a teacher, to be a doctor and to get higher education to fulfil these dreams. Why? Because they want to help people in villages like theirs; they want to change people's lives for the better; they want to change their communities; our friends are working to change their towns and villages because Jesus has changed their lives; in Jesus' name they work to "create strong, independent, hope-filled communities", to serve people in need, be they children, families, and villages, so that life will be better. Read the letter and pray for them!

Are there things we want to change? Things about ourselves? Things about Juniper Green or Baberton Mains? Things about the church? Things about the world? At times we are acutely aware of the need for things to be changed and then either we go to work to make that change or we sit back and wait for others because we can't be bothered or because we feel the change is too big for us. How do we change the world? It is hard to do it all at once. Perhaps we do it one person at a time! How do we change a community? In the same way! We change people's minds and help them to think better and to have better attitudes and so people will be changed and when people are changed communities are changed, and the world is transformed! What difference does the resurrection make to human living?

Jesus' friends are in hiding and are frightened; but seven weeks later they are on streets of Jerusalem telling the world about Jesus, being bold and persistent. What changed them? In today's passage from John 20 they are frightened and in hiding, in their room with the doors locked as we said earlier. Jesus appears amongst them, through the locked doors; He just appears! He speaks to them; He shows them His hands and side and John tells us "*The disciples...*" (John 20:20) Next week, they are there again and Thomas: for ever given the nickname "doubting" – he believes, but his faith is in two minds; the Chinese version of doubt is to have "a foot in 2 boats"! His faith is in two minds until he sees Jesus and the marks in His hands and side, and Thomas sees this for himself and his mind is changed; he is no longer in two minds, but with a great declaration of faith, he says "*My Lord...*" (John 20:28) He is a changed man, from being a slightly troubled, isolated figure to someone who gives his life to Jesus and to serve Him and makes perhaps the greatest declaration of faith in the whole New Testament.

What made the difference for the disciples? They met Jesus! It is as simple as that; they met Jesus! Their encounter with Jesus did all sorts of things to them and for them: meeting Jesus took away their fear, they became overjoyed; meeting Jesus gave them a new purpose in life – "*As the...*" (John 20:21), a mission, a service to engage in; meeting Jesus gave them a new power to equip them when Jesus "*breathed on...*" (John 20:22); meeting Jesus gave Thomas a new sense of his faith, stronger, deeper, more assured than before. They were new people because of their meeting with Jesus and that stayed with them for the rest of their lives; these are two evenings they would never forget, two evenings that left an indelible mark on their hearts and minds. We'll see in a moment that this encounter not only transformed them as individuals but transformed the community of which they were members.

We say "it was easy for them; Jesus was there and they saw Him face to face!" So, Jesus says: "*because you...*" (John 20:29) That's us; that's where we come in; the same blessing that changed the disciples is at work in us. We meet Jesus when we read these stories; somehow the man about whom these stories speak comes up out of the page to meet us as

we read them. We meet Jesus in worship, in communion, and when we pray. Jesus gives us a new purpose, a mission in partnership with Him. Jesus gives us a new power to help us live and to equip us, the power of the Spirit lives in us. Meeting Jesus creates faith and then gives our faith new strength and courage. There are times when we are frightened and lost, or life is hard, and Jesus is able to help us then too! He knocks on the door of our hearts and wants to come in to meet with us; there are times when we don't hear, or the door is overgrown with other things, but encountering Jesus in these ways changes our lives.

Transformed people make transformed communities. We read a story from Acts 4 all about a transformed community, a church. Here is the group of disciples with a deep sense of belonging together and making that belonging work. It started from preaching the gospel: "*With great power...*" (Acts 4:33) and from there they shared everything, and everybody cared for each other. "*All the...*" (Acts 4:32,34f) and Barnabas becomes the example. Here is a community living out the transformation that the gospel brings and putting that transformation into practice; they love one another. People who think "gospel" live by the gospel. People who are changed by the love and grace of God in the gospel, live by putting that love and grace into practice and so they care for one another and in this case do so by their property.

By nature, by instinct, human beings are selfish and self-centred. Our natural instinct is to look after "number one" and by that we mean ourselves, first, second and last; there may be a place for families as well, but not much else. We live in a world that admires pride and power and in which people grow up wanting to be rich and famous and you can only be rich and famous if you are prepared to be ruthless and think only about "myself". In Acts 4, here's a community living by very different values; the early church is living by the values of love and grace, caring for people no matter who they are, sharing what I have with people who have nothing. The ways in which we go about being this kind of community are different, but the ethos is the same. A couple of years ago, the Kirk Session decided that we needed to consider the way in which our church leadership behaves and goes about our business; we created an ethos statement to which we all signed up, agreeing that this is way we will be. It is about treating one another with respect, listening to one another, praying for one another and all of us taking responsibility for every Kirk Session decision even if it is not our personal opinion. These are the same values of love and grace in the gospel, spelled out and lived out in the way we go about being leaders of congregation. We need reminding from time to time, but these are not the ways of the world's leadership; this is not the way of the world's boardrooms, but the way of leadership in the church of Jesus.

Do we want to change the world? Then first of all we need to be changed people. Be changed; be open to encounter Jesus in worship, in the Bible, in prayer, in communion and be changed by that encounter; let the grace of God in the gospel change us from being self-centred people to be a people who are loving and gracious to one another. Do we want to change the world? Then tell people about Jesus: we have no other power to change the world than the power of the gospel; the story of Jesus transforms people, and transforms communities, and turns the world upside down! That's what we're called to do, to tell people about Jesus and let the Spirit work in their hearts and minds; the Spirit changes people; the Spirit transforms people, communities, and indeed the world and the Spirit works as we tell people the story of Jesus.

So what difference does the resurrection make to human living? We are transformed by it. The disciples were transformed by meeting the risen Jesus: they were bold instead of frightened; they were assured instead of having faith in two minds; they were powerful instead of weak; they were loving instead of self-centred. As they were changed, so the community of which they were a part was changed too, with values shaped by love and grace. Do we want to be a church, or a community shaped by grace? Then we need to be individuals shaped by the same grace; it doesn't work in any other way! Transformed individuals create transformed communities. This is the power of the resurrection at work in the world.