**Sermon Easter 2, 11th April 2021**

By The Revd Graham Phillips

Acts 4.32-35, John 20.19-31

I wonder if you like reading? And if you do then what do you read and for what purpose? Do you read for pleasure, a novel, poetry? Or do you read to gain facts, to understand things, to know something? Maybe a reference book? Even a theological book? Or maybe you are an avid reader of the newspaper, or social media on your screen, you like to know what is going on around you, in the world.

How does what you read, affect or influence you? What we feed our mind with will have an impact on us.

At the end of this passage we have just heard read, John writes “These words are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

That is a huge statement. The Daily Mirror, your news feed, your favourite novel will not do this. No other writings offer us this truth, this life. It is no wonder that the bible is the world’s best seller, the most read book, the most translated book in the world and will always be so.

“These words are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter, the extraordinary rising from the dead of Jesus Christ. That is the foundation of our faith. If Jesus had not risen then this church would be not here, we would not be worshipping God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We would not be listening to these words, we would not have the wealth of hymns and songs we are familiar with. Our law, our institutions, our society would be very different. As would our relationships with each other. Christianity has permeated every aspect of life for the last 2000 years - its imprint is with us whether we recognise it or not.

So we give thanks and praise God for John and the other New Testament writers for putting down in permanent form what they had seen and experienced.

These words in this book are powerful. They are the words of life.

Let us look more closely at this wonderful passage.

On the evening of Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples had locked themselves away, terrified that every knock on the door would be the authorities come to gather them for crucifixion. Despite the door being locked, Jesus appears among them. What a lovely scene that must have been. Perhaps they thought he was a ghost? It is no wonder that he speaks God’s peace to them. They need it....Are you ever afraid? Unsure of life? Invite Jesus into your presence and receive his peace.

Then Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This is John’s Pentecost, the conferring on to the disciples the same Holy Spirit that Jesus himself had received at His baptism, the Holy Spirit who empowered Him to heal, gave him wisdom and spiritual knowledge to recognise and know what were the root causes of illness or problems and how to pray for the necessary release. That same Holy Spirit is now being given to the disciples to similarly empower them. What a gift from Jesus. This is something he had promised he would do. He does not leave them rootless, but embeds and cloaks them in the authority and power of God himself. This promise is for us as well...Imagine Jesus saying to you: “Receive the Holy Spirit”...Let Jesus breath on you...Receive God’s presence, peace and power. Power to love, power to forgive.

Then John writes this amazing statement about forgiving sins and the retention or release of sins. This statement is part of the final actions of Jesus to his disciples. So Jesus thinks it is important. Do you know you have authority to forgive the sins of someone who has harmed you? Jesus died on the cross to enable us to have our sins forgiven. Are we going to hold on to anger or bitterness and not forgive? If we do then we are not embracing all that Jesus did for us on the cross. We are saying it is not for me. My anger, my bitterness is more valuable to me than forgiving. I have a right to remain angry, to remain bitter and I will not relinquish that right.

This is like saying that I have a right to hold on to a burning coal even if it burns my skin away. The strange thing about bitterness is that we give it power when we hold on to it. By itself the coal would cool down and no longer harm but when fed by anger, by bitterness it burns more fiercely and causes irreparable harm.

So examine yourself, see if there is any anger, bitterness or resentment in you. It can be fed by disappointment, by shattered hopes and dreams.

Our daughter died over 4 years ago and yesterday would have been her 26th birthday. There is a part of me that can be sorry for her and myself, sorrow and self pity that slides into bitterness and then runs into anger. I choose those verbs deliberately - the sorrow if unchecked does slide to bitterness and once bitterness gets a hold it quickly runs to anger. Anger towards God for not healing her, anger for the pain she suffered. This is a fruitless journey of destruction that only separates me from God and prevents me from receiving his peace, his love, his joy.

If you have any regrets, any disappointments, name them, speak to Jesus about them and relinquish them to Jesus. Hand them over to Jesus, forgive yourself, forgive others, and seek God’s peace, and his Holy Spirit.

These are the final actions made by Jesus for his disciples as recorded by John. They are an important part of John’s record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. A record that was written so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.

Take these words to heart, let their message, their truth be imprinted upon your heart and mind so that like Thomas you can declare

“My Lord and my God.”

Amen.

The Revd Graham D Phillips