

## Reflections in Solitude — Week 4

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#### First, a bit of biblical background

Read as a literary whole, John chapter 20 reflects the transition made by the beloved community from being Jews who believe Jesus was the Messiah, through a time of exclusion and dislocation, to becoming the Body of Christ continuing the ministry of Jesus by his Spirit. The chapter is made up of three scenes, each responding to questions the beloved community was asking during their remaking: Where is Jesus? How can we encounter Jesus now? Who are we as a community of believers?

The exchange between Jesus and Thomas in the final scene of this chapter includes images of the sacramental nature of the beloved community that was beginning to form at this time. While still drawing upon their Jewish roots, the believers were starting to shape their self-identity and worship around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

For example, John is the only Gospel to include the piercing of Jesus' side at his crucifixion. The blood and water that pours from Jesus brings to mind the rich imagery of blood and water used throughout scripture. By the time John's Gospel was written, blood (Eucharist) and water (baptism) were becoming symbols within the developing Church.

If we step back from the final scene and set it within the wider landscape of the emerging Church, some of the elements take on new meaning. In inviting Thomas to reach out and touch his side—the place from which blood and water flowed—Jesus encourages Thomas to encounter his presence in the sacramental community. Don't believe because of the spoken witness alone, that is, "We have seen the Lord!" but partake of the Spirit of Christ within, underneath, behind, beyond the water and the blood.

In experiencing the fulness of the Church's ministry, one comes to believe: *My Lord and my God!* All this, of course, is rounded off in the chapter's stunning conclusion: Blessed are those who come to believe that God is love, not because they are able to meet Jesus in the flesh, but through his continued ministry in the Body of Christ, the Church.

#### On a more personal note

I find the beauty of John 20 inspiring. The up-close-and-personal encounters between Jesus and Mary in the garden, the disciples in the locked room, and Thomas are moving to me. The imagery and mission of the Church as the continuing Body of Christ in the world are familiar and ennobling.

But in these weeks when we are experiencing a kind of diaspora—our Congregation scattered, worshipping and ministering together apart—the chapter has been jarring for me as well. Though I understand the context for his boldness, I feel uncomfortable with the evangelist's strong assertions that the Spirit of Jesus is with *the believers alone*. I feel uneasy with the importance he seems to place on the beloved community as *the locus* of Jesus' ongoing work in the world.

As with all of scripture, John's Gospel is intended to be read and re-read with the hope of fresh encounter with the living Christ. Therefore, given my experience during these days, questions have been raised in my reading this time around such as:

What potential gifts might come from viewing the loving activity of God in a less centralised, less institutionalised way? In other words, how might we support one another in integrating the way of Jesus into the *whole of our lives* rather than enacting the Christian life and ministry solely through the church when it is gathered?

What might our vocation to bear witness to God's love look and sound like in our day? Especially as we consider the devastation of creation, what might it be for us to "practice the radical love" that "knows no bounds" that "does not stop at any border, even the human one" as Sallie McFague says it?

And finally, related to this, where is Christ now? Where in addition to humanity and its Church do we encounter the Spirit of Jesus?

If in the face of their exclusion and persecution, the evangelist attempted to validate and encourage the budding community of believers, it occurs to me that in our time, it may be creation that needs to be brought further into our consciousness and into our spiritual practices and loving service.

Therefore, I welcome the voices of theologians and artists who direct us back to our roots, who uncover the Spirit flowing in and through all creation, who raise for us the compelling image of the land itself as the Body of Christ. What might it be for us to listen and enjoin ourselves to *this Body*? to engage in a relationship with creation not primarily as that of caretakers, but as *members of a universal, sacred community of God*? to come to believe and proclaim *My God and my Lord* through our encounter of Christ in the sacramental life of the earth?

These are some of my questions. I trust you have some of your own. I look forward to hearing your reflections and sharing conversation together.

My greatest hope and the potential gift of these months will be for us not to return to business as usual—not personally nor in the life we share as a church—but to gain insight for a future that is more deeply grounded in God. For us to be open, as the Gospel was open, to exploring how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus can shape our identity and ways of being. And like the Beloved Disciple, Mary, and Thomas, to be given the courage of Christ's Spirit to continue on the journey of becoming.

## "The Messenger"

by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing,  
since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren,  
to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.



### Suggested ABC viewing for further dialogue:

*Compass* series 34—"For the Love of Creation"

*Australian Story* 2020—"Fighting Fire with Fire"