

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter. 12.4.26

The Russian mindset is quite different from our own. Diarmid McCulloch puts it down to isolated communities adapting to life in the vast empty plains and forests of “north-eastern Europe stretching towards the ferocious landscapes of the far north ...” (p519 History of Christianity). Loneliness was part of everyday experience and so Orthodoxy emphasised corporate life

*“Individualism was not a virtue, nor was a spirituality which valued new perspectives or original thoughts about the mystery of faith: it looked for deepening of tradition, enrichment of the existing liturgy, enhanced insight through meditation.”*

- And extremely long services compared to what has developed in the West. Dear ex-Brother Tom is now an Orthodox priest and once took his father along to an Orthodox service abroad, at the end of which his father, who was brought up a Catholic, said *“Don’t ever do that to me again.”* Different cultures different mind-sets – not least in following different calendars and celebrating the Resurrection on different days. The danger comes when we emphasise the differences to the detriment of all we have in common, those flag-waving exercises attractive to both left and right, that lack of understanding which not only geography but individual difference so readily enhances – none of us indeed can ever fully stand in the footsteps of another. Today’s gospel passage highlights this negotiating of difference right at the very beginning of Christianity – the coming together of people in the name of Christ
- *“ Unless I see the holes that the nails made in His hands and can put my finger into the holes they made and unless I can put my hand into his side I refuse to believe.”*  
Thomas does not understand what has happened to his brothers and sisters in Christ. There’s been a transformation – perhaps he is envious, feeling left out, wanting to belong but not knowing how. Until it’s done for him, until Christ himself touches him. This is the experience of faith, of transformation, which we cannot deny to others simply because they differ culturally, politically or in any other way from ourselves, not least in their necessary occupation of a different geographical space. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we hear of an idealised new Israel, occupying the Temple as of old but in a new way, they

*“all lived together and owned everything in common, they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed,”*

a model the Russians have famously also tried with mixed success, but we share a nostalgia for it in both East and West. Benedictine life is partly about that too but Peter’s first letter brings us back to earth, we have joy in the knowledge of salvation but *“you may for a short time have to bear being plagued by all sorts of trials.”* What he fails to say is that those trials will come as much from within the Christian community as from without and *“for a short time”* read *“life”*. What makes the Benedictine Rule of Life so

attractive, so manageable, is that it is obviously born of practice, and allows for the lived experience of difference – if I dare paraphrase it as “*if this doesn't work try this or whatever.*” From outside of course we are idealised, from inside it really is a miracle we are still here- negotiating difference by the minute with a structure that helps but can be changed when it doesn't. If we want a symbol or sign of this inherent flexibility in the understanding of one another in Christ look no further than all the different characters in John's gospel and their varying reactions to Christ, or to all the different endings the Gospels have not least in their post- resurrection appearances. The only uniformity that's called for is the desire for Christ, for God, for love.

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