

‘Look at my hands and my feet: see that it is I myself’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Oxford, up from the Magdalen Bridge where the river Cherwell snakes between St Catz and New Marston, there is a place perfect for bathing. It is fairly secluded, almost never passed by punts which stick to the main course of the river, and so historically was the place where swimmers would eschew bathing costumes completely and enjoy the water whilst nude. Given this reputation, and affected by the reputation of the clergy, it became known, as it is to this day, as ‘Parson’s Pleasure’.

Just before the war, it was being used by a group of enthusiastic fellows of various colleges, including the Warden of Wadham College, Maurice Bowra. As the men were drying off disaster struck: a mal-directed punt filled with young ladies hove into view, just as the naked senior academics were in full view. Instinctively, the group rushed to tie towels around their waists, all of them, that is, with the exception of Bowra who simply threw his towel over his head, leaving the rest of his body in full view.

Afterwards, when the danger had passed and the shocked lady punters were safely out the way, the others asked Bowra why he had acted differently. ‘Well gentlemen,’ he replied, ‘I don’t know about you but in Oxford the part of my body I’m generally recognised by is my face’.

It is inevitable that our physical appearances become seen as defining features. When describing someone we might reasonably refer to things like the colour of their hair or their height or the shape of their facial features. It is one of the ways which we recognise one another. Often though, the defining features we have are those that are different to other people’s. It perhaps plays into the difficult relationships we can often have with our appearances that the thing about our appearance which we might most obviously recognise or which would be naturally distinctive, is something that is not as it ought to be: something like a blemish or a scar.

I know this because I have a distinct scar, a relic of open heart surgery as a baby. Now fortunately- despite the name of the bathing place in Oxford- I have no intention of walking round town with my top off. And so while in Charlbury I hope to remain most recognised by my face, I am still defined by a scar on my body, a blemish to my physical appearance.

So it is in our Gospel today. We have another appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection. Another incident where they, perhaps reasonably, can’t believe their eyes. So, as with Thomas last week, Jesus points to distinct parts of his body, recognisable parts of his body, in order to prove to them that it really is him.

When they express doubt he says: ‘Look at my hands and my feet: see that it is I myself’. Now, that might seem odd. To paraphrase Bowra, very few of us are known

by our hands or our feet. But these are no ordinary hands, no ordinary feet. Jesus's hands and feet are the parts of him that bear scars, the places by which he was affixed to the Cross.

These body parts become his defining features, become the way in which he is recognised, not because they are perfect or beautiful but precisely because they are wounded, because they bear scars. It is by those scars that they recognise who Jesus is. And today, by echoing the actions of the disciples and meditating upon those scars, we might recognise who God is.

Why? Well, what do those scars mean? They are the physical reminders of two realities: of both death and of resurrection. They are the fleshly proofs that Jesus was content to endure the cross and the grave, and that in doing so, he conquered death not for himself but for us. They are the physical evidence that the love which God has for us in Christ is literally stronger than death itself, lasts beyond death itself. Why is Jesus known by these scars? Because those scars are signs of love.

Indeed, they are signs of the power of love. That even things demonstrably horrible, things that are physical reminders of pain. Even they are not beyond redemption. Even they are not beyond the power of love.

And if they are not beyond it, then nor are we. Each of us, known by those scars or unique physical blemishes, or bearing wounds of heart or of mind: each of us is looked on and called by love. By a God who is love and has the scars to prove it. 'Look at my hands and my feet: see that it is I myself'.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.