

April 27, 2025 – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Reading: John 20.19-end

We all have different styles of learning. We all have different preferences in how we take in and process new information. Some of us, like me, are very fond of reading. Others are great listeners. The art of listening seems to be lost somewhat in our days. Which is perhaps why in the Church of England, priests in training are told that their sermons should in general not be longer than circa ten minutes. And with attention spans getting shorter, even that may feel like quite long for many of us. But I have to say that I am quite surprised to see how many in particular younger people have gotten into listening lengthy podcasts. So perhaps I should be less careful not to cross the 1000 words threshold that I always set to myself and go for much longer sermons, or should I? Still I think that our culture has been geared away somewhat from focusing on reading and listening, the so called verbal learning, towards the use of images, related to visual learning. There is also another way of learning, namely by touching and feeling stuff, experimenting with it. Trying things out in a more direct bodily way. This is called a kinaesthetic or tactile learning style. I guess most of us would probably like to have a bit of everything, but we all have our preferences.

This is of course also relevant when it comes to learning more about God. It is indeed important and helpful to try to use all our senses in order to open ourselves up for encountering God in many different ways. Church buildings with their architecture and many artworks offer us plenty of visual ways to experience the divine. Moreover, our liturgy and worship is meant to engage all our faculties, our whole being; body and mind. And so we have a lot of music and singing. In other traditions this is accompanied by a raising of arms, clapping of hands and even dancing as well. In church we offer many words to hear, read and inwardly digest. But we also like to have some silence, for instance before our service starts. Our church rituals also involve touch and feel. Only last week, those of us who were here have felt those drops of water richly sprinkled over them and on their foreheads at the re-affirmation of the baptismal vows. And we have this typical Anglican practice of sitting down and standing up several times during our services, in ways that may confuse those who are not familiar with it. You can also see me bowing and regularly making the sign of the cross. Traditionally we would also add kneeling to these bodily gestures, especially when we receive communion, but unfortunately we can't do this here.

In today's Gospel reading it is Thomas who reminds us that just listening or reading the words of the Bible, hearing the testimonies of our Christian friends and church family members, is simply not sufficient for our faith. We all need to make our own, very personal experiences with God, with our risen Lord Jesus, with the Holy Spirit in our own lives in order to deepen our faith. Just like Thomas, to counter our doubts and scepticism which are only natural. Such experiences can become what someone has once called kind of an extra gospel, the good news of our own testimonies. Especially when we write them down, which is very good to do. So Thomas is probably right and speaks in a way for all of us when he says: 'Unless I see, unless I touch with my finger, feel in my hand, I am not able to believe.' Of course, our seeing and touching can't be in the same way as those first witnesses; the

women around Jesus, such as Mary Magdalene, the disciples about to become the apostles, such as Peter, John and Thomas. They were the prime witnesses of Christ's resurrection before he ascended into heaven. So we listen to their testimonies and are invited to believe that they are trustworthy. And we are told that we are blessed when we are willing and able to make that leap of faith, even without seeing it with our own eyes.

But there still remains also for us a lot to see, hear, feel and experience when it comes to the loving presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, already when we come to church regularly. On Good Friday some of us came together to meditate on the stations of the cross. Likewise we can use all those many depictions of the cross and of Christ himself with which we surround ourselves here in church and hopefully also in our homes. We can use objects to touch such as a rosary or this so called 'holding cross'. We may also feel the peace that our risen Lord offers us by what we say and hear for instance this morning. We have just heard Jesus saying 'Peace be with you!' no less than three times in today's Gospel passage. We will all echo these words in a few minutes. And in our conclusion of the service the 'peace that passes all understanding' is often mentioned.

Finally, there is of course something else on offer in our worship that appeals to all our styles of learning, involves all our senses. That is the Lord's Supper, which he himself installed and asked us to continue to do when we meet in his name. Because he knew that it would help to foster our believe in him, to deepen our relationship with him. And because we regard the sacrament of the Eucharist as the core of our worship, we are called to offer it on every Sunday.

We hear the words, we see the elements and feel in our hands and on our tongues the bread and wine, smelling it and tasting the goodness of the Lord and his enduring love for us. Partaking in Holy Communion is probably as close as we can get here on earth to that same experience that Thomas was longing for. Meeting the risen Lord by touching the wounds of his broken body, by receiving his body and blood in the bread that is broken and the wine that is outpoured for us. Reminding us that our Saviour went through death to enter new life, so that we are able to die and rise again with him to that new life in which, as our prayer expresses it, we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen