

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Second Sunday of Easter

24th April 2022

David Jones was a painter and writer of the last century. As a young man he fought in the First World War. Twenty years later he wrote about it in *In Parenthesis*. And all his life, if he was staying in your house and you brought him a cup of early morning tea, he would say 'Ah! Gunfire!', because apparently gunfire was army slang for early morning tea. It's a tiny poem. Tea's gunfire, because it wakes you up. It's gunfire, because it rouses you in the early morning. It's not gunfire, because it's tea. It's not gunfire, because it's welcome and homely and safe. It's a tiny poem, packing in experience and feeling and story.

That's a fragment of the war, a bit of experience. Experience has meaning. We find ways to understand it. We ground it. We name it.

Another fragment. One wet Sunday, off duty in the trenches, Jones went off to look for firewood. He came across a farm building, a cattle shed. That might have firewood. He put his eye to a crack in the wall, and through it he could see two candles, and a man in church vestments, and a white cloth over a table made of piled-up ammunition boxes, and other men kneeling round this table. It was the eucharist, the Catholic chaplain saying mass. He never forgot it, this tiny vision: mass on the front line, Christ in the trenches.

David Jones survived the war. He was already a poet and a painter. He became a Catholic. That was how he grounded and named that tiny vision. He went on thinking about how words pack in meaning, how humans create things - works of art, slang, church services - that say something about our experience, and how in creation God says something in us and in all the stuff of the world. He thought about words and about matter.

This is David Jones talking about what it's like to hold to the Christian faith.

The belief of the... Church commits its adherents, in a most inescapable manner, to the body and the embodied; hence to history, to locality, to epoch and site, to sense-perception, to the contactual, the known, the felt, the seen, the handled, the cared for, the tended, the conserved; to the qualitative and to the intimate.

He's saying that things matter. The Christian faith commits us to the body and the embodied. And, as Jones points out, that is in contrast with some other forms of religious belief, and with many ideas about what faith is. It's a standard criticism of faith that it's all about the immaterial. 'Pie in the sky when you die' still has enough bite, as a criticism, for Christian Aid to use the strapline 'We believe in life before death'. But no, he's saying, it is grounded, named, embodied.

It is because the Christian faith commits us, inescapably, to the body and the embodied, that we can't get away from the notion that bodies matter, and so food and drink matter, and shelter, and not being enslaved, and dignity and respect, and medical care, and education... Stuff matters. Matter matters. This is a faith which proclaims that God was

incarnate as human, born on a particular day in a particular place. Birth and time and space matter. Death matters. Here in this morning's gospel, when the other disciples have encountered the risen Jesus and Thomas wasn't there, it matters to Thomas not only that he should also meet the Lord but also that that encounter should be embodied. Thomas is right. His insistence is a gift to us. The embodiment of that encounter is the guarantee of its truth.

This is a faith, then, which commits us to the body and the embodied, and that has very interesting consequences when it comes to the way we treat the earth and each other. Stuff matters. History, locality, the known, the felt, the seen, the handled, the cared for. These matter. We need to be there on the ground.

The Very Revd Dr Elizabeth Thomson

Rector & Provost