

Sermon

Capillaries

19.5.18

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Daniel 6: 1-23
Mark 15:46 - 16:8

Darius, the king of Babylon, has fallen for a political trick. Daniel, a Judean, taken into exile by the Babylonians, has been promoted over many years, to the intense dislike of the local political class.

Daniel, by his unflinching and unyielding observance of Faith, has firstly interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar - and warned him of the feet of clay that sit at the base of all temporal kings; he has survived an ordeal by fire from the same King for refusing to worship a golden statue; he has interpreted the King's fate to be deposed and to fall so far that he will eat grass in order to learn the lesson that God has sovereignty of mortals, not mere Kings; he has interpreted the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's Feast when the Temple vessels were desecrated, and now he has the trust and confidence of Darius who succeeded Belshazzar - Darius the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel has served wisely, faithfully and with integrity and honesty three generations of Babylonian kings and, having earned the King's reward, has attracted the jealousy of the King's supporters.

So a law is passed that anyone who prays to anyone for thirty days will be cast into a den of lions. Once the king has signed the interdict, it cannot be revoked. Such is the Rule of Law in Persia, and so it is that the trap is laid for Daniel. Unwittingly, Darius signs off on the law, to keep the peace. And so as soon as Daniel kneels to pray to God, kneeling towards Jerusalem in full view, he is arrested and brought before Darius for punishment under the law.

So, a political trick. Darius is devastated but must follow through. And so it is that Daniel is sealed in and the stone is rolled across the entrance, and Darius, fretting and regretful spends a long night waiting in fasting - "and sleep had fled from him".

A stone across what should, as sure as eggs is eggs, be for Daniel, his tomb.

Politics has conspired to seek to do down faith. Daniel, the man of integrity who literally has spoken truth to power for three generations of Persian kings, has become the victim of a political pincer movement; a movement so cunning that the one person who could have saved him - King Darius - is unable so to do. The law has been misused and exploited; its very virtue and integrity wrought as a weapon against itself to bring about evil.

And so it goes.

We live in a political age of threat. We do not face the organised menace of emergent fascist states in Europe as in the Thirties - but we do see the rise of the far right in Eastern Europe; we do see here, through populism and charismatic leadership, a worrying siren call, bringing in to the mainstream views that once were clearly without; we find self-styled “people of the people” with winning smiles and smooth reassurance, emboldened to step out in public and stir up feelings variously against others of other faiths, or the political “establishment”, intelligent objection, and even the rule of law.

We live in an age of a threatened social fabric. We seem to have rocketing homelessness and poverty - we have Foodbanks that have become a new normality; we have the insult of homelessness as part of the furniture of the street.

We live in an age of climate crisis. It would be one thing to say that we are sleep-walking to disaster, but that would be kidding ourselves. No: we are walking eyes wide open into the catastrophe of climate change. Whether it is walruses or forest fires, daily we are told that we are killing our planet, our habitats, the natural world - and soon each other.

We live in an age of geo-political instability: we have an Administration in the United States of America that delights in gripping the sides of the boat and rocking it violently this way and that: we have treaties torn up from climate change, to arms proliferation, to restrictions on nuclear programmes. There are mavericks who, on one view, are spoiling for a fight, any fight - just let's have a fight - North Korea, Russia, China or Iran - who cares?

We have a veritable lions' den; prowling, shadowy, now glimpsed, now gone again, now heard far off, now suddenly alarmingly close to; in the shadows, and occasionally emboldened to circle a little closer.

And what do we have in response? Actually, a lot. We have Us. We have in our faith all the tools to stand up and speak truth to the power. We have senior clergy who by rolling their sleeves up in Foodbanks make a point; we have voices raised against homelessness; we have voices raised against climate change as it is part of our sovereign duty as God's people to care for and nurture the environment. There is all that goes on at Parish level.

But it is hard. Sometimes it is difficult to stand up and argue back. Sometimes our courage fails us. Sometimes it is all too much. Perhaps sometimes our faith fails us to say or do what we should.

In our reading from Mark we hear of the longest night of our Christian story. We can remember Darius fasting and fretting; but on the night of the Sabbath how the women must have laid awake waiting for the sun to come up over the horizon, for the Sabbath to be over, to rush to the tomb to the anoint the body of our judicially murdered Lord.

Another stone across a tomb.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, they bring spices to anoint the body of Jesus. But who will roll the stone away?

The tomb is empty - and they are told by the enigmatic man in white that “he is raised - he is not here.” The commentators point out that this does not necessarily equate with resurrection; and, not knowing the end as we do, they flee in terror and amazement and ignore the instruction to tell Peter that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee, where he will appear. Mark tells us that they said nothing, *for they were afraid*.

And we can be afraid. We can be afraid to do what is right; to call out what is wrong; to live in the right and reject the wrong. We are human, after all.

But our faith does not desert us even when we think it does. If you take your finger and squeeze the tip of it, the surrounding area goes red with the displaced blood, but the area you have pressed goes white. Doctors measure this. It is called the “capillary refill time”. The point is that in all those tiny capillaries that perfuse throughout the body, that carry the oxygenated blood to all parts of the body - that life giving oxygenated blood - they will, however hard we press, refill, flood back into life, re-taking up position.

It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is not unlike that. We are pressed by the world and we fear we lose our strength or our capacity to respond - our very being as Christians is assailed. We wonder where is God in all of this? Why is there a young couple sharing a mattress in the half-light of a winter commuter dawn outside Kings Cross railway station? Can we resist and reverse the headlong, headstrong Trump?

We can. Because like Daniel in the lion’s den - the Holy Spirit does not leave us. When we are so far pressed it will come flooding back - energised, energising, emboldening. We have the Holy Spirit at work in us if we are nothing more than a dignified, unyielding silence in the face of a charming man who wants you to agree to swallow his rhetoric; when we open our Community Rooms to the local parish in September and state that we are here; or when we fill a Christian Aid envelope. In myriad, small ways, we fight back.

One stone was rolled across Daniel; another across Jesus.

Who will roll the stone away?

We know. We know who rolls the stone away, however bleak life looks :- nothing, no tomb, no lions in any shape will ever, *can ever*, triumph over the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and grants us peace.

And who emerges triumphant - not dead, not buried, not finished, not suborned,
not silenced?

We do - in, through and by the grace of the God the Father, God the Son, and God
the Holy Spirit: we do.

Amen

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