

Rev. James Shakespeare's Easter Sunday Sermon, 12.4.20

'Alleluia! Christ is risen!' Or as the angel spoke to Mary Magdalen and the other Mary at the tomb, on that first Easter morning, 'Do not be afraid... Go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised... and is going ahead of you."'

We have, in our readings today, this amazing Good News. 'Christ is risen!' Our time of exile is over. For the exiles in Babylon Jeremiah indeed promised that their suffering would come to an end. He reminds them that again they shall take their tambourines and dance for joy; again God would rebuild their former devastations; they would plant vineyards on the mountain heights, and go up to Ephraim, to their great House of Prayer: 'Come let us go up to Zion.' Just as we, here, long to return to our beloved St John's, and worship together.

And Peter witnessing to Cornelius and the other Gentiles, after the Resurrection, begins to unfold this remarkable Gospel – this amazing Good News – now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is 'Lord of all': 'We are witnesses to all that he did' Peter tells the crowd, 'both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear... [and] He commanded us to preach that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead; everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.'

It is an amazing claim, a remarkable proclamation of Good News – unlike any other - which is what the Greek Gospel, Evangelion, means. But the question is, today, how do we reconcile this Good news with the state of the world – and our society – now: in the grip of the Coronavirus? And how do we respond, in the light of what God is telling us, this Easter?

I'm sure we all agree it is a harrowing time, for our nation and our world; arguably, as our Queen reminded us a week ago, unlike anything we've experienced since the Second World War. And yet, now our enemy is invisible, a microscopic virus, which spreads so easily, and has the potential to bring life, as we know it, to an end.

And how much our hearts go out to patients suffering from this terrible disease, to health workers on the frontline, to anxious relatives, and indeed to all who are struggling under the lock-down, not least the poor and the vulnerable. May God indeed hasten the end of this scourge; may he inspire us all to work to eradicate such suffering; and may he strengthen our Church – and all Christians – to grow, through it, in faith and Christ-like service of others.

So how do we reconcile the Good news of Easter, with COVID-19?

One of the themes we find in the New Testament, as early Christians grappled with living the joy of Easter in places still afflicted by human suffering – by persecution, war, famine and disease – is this: the idea that God’s Kingdom, realised by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, is both ‘now and not yet’. In other words, God has saved us and rescued our world, eternally, from suffering, sin and death – his Kingdom is victorious, and all who believe in Him will never die; indeed the Bible anticipates a time when the whole creation – the whole cosmos – will be gathered up again, into the mystery of God’s Kingdom.

But, alongside of this deep spiritual truth and wider perspective, is the reality of the now – of the in-between, if you like. The time between that first Easter and our final consummation, when the world – and ourselves – still experience suffering and sin and death. The spectre that we now witness, with the tragic spread and impacts of Coronavirus, and indeed all times and places, in human history, which have witnessed plague, famine, war, trauma and death.

So alongside the eternal joy of resurrection – of Jesus Christ risen from the dead and present with us now – is the ‘now and not yet’ of human suffering and unfulfilled hope. The in-between time...

So what do we do about this? And how do we reconcile our joy at the Good News of Easter, with our pain at enforced isolation, with the graphic images of sickness and suffering on our TV screens, and with our friends who are health workers or patients, right now?

Well I want to suggest three very simple things, all offered to us by the scriptures, and present in the earliest preaching of the post-Easter church. Three simple spiritual attitudes, which we can hold onto and enact in our lives today, not least during the lock-down, in order that we – whatever our situation and struggle – can be witnesses to Gospel hope today, whilst remaining real about the pain and the suffering of our world. And they are three simple words: Faith, Hope and Love. What are sometimes called the ‘theological virtues’, because they are all gifts of God.

So firstly, Faith. Whatever the challenges of our present situation, of our emotional or physical health, our worries about loved ones, jobs or livelihoods, the Gospel invites us to Believe. To believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, and his eternal triumph over suffering sin and death; to trust in his Light, shining in the darkness, allowing that Light – like a small seed – to be planted in the soil of our hearts; and through honest and faithful prayer, to allow that inner seed of faith in Jesus, to be watered, to receive Sunlight, and grow, becoming abundant, in our heart and lives. As Peter bids us, ‘everyone who believes in him’ will be saved. It is a wonderful promise.

And I don't know about you, but my experience of faith, over the years, is that even through tough times – times of grief and struggle and isolation – one can allow that seed of faith to grow, allowing God to germinate in us and work through us, by his Holy Spirit, and especially through prayer, at heart being present to Jesus, who is always present with us.

Secondly, Hope. What a difference it makes, having heard the message of Easter, and put our trust in Jesus, to have this Hope. What Hebrews calls a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. Hope makes all the difference, as we are liberated from the deepest of anxieties and existential dread, to know that – whatever outward appearances – that God is with us, that He is at work within us, bringing to birth that eternal reality of resurrection: of turning our tombs of mourning into places that are 'presence filled' with Christ's resurrection love. Yes, God is at work, and he is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory, as we hold fast to him. Isaiah says, "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will rise up on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

And thirdly, and perhaps most important of all – in terms of our everyday witness to the resurrection – Love... For Easter calls us, as we abide in the here and now, in the now and not yet of God's Kingdom, above all, to witness to Christ's love, to become channels of his saving love to others, and to be moulded into being Christ-like witnesses, by our words and actions, in the world today.

Yes, God needs us, this year of all years, not simply to remain on the mountain top of Easter day – even if, for a time, we're not at liberty to leave our homes or meet others face-to-face. But God invites us to become witnesses of his resurrection through growing in Christ-like love for others: through prayer, through fellowship, through phoning or skyping another person, through volunteering, supporting the vulnerable, fulfilling our day-to-day duties faithfully. Yes, God calls us to reveal his love for others, and so to build up his Church, Christ's risen Body, in the light of Easter. As Hebrews puts it, 'Let mutual love continue.' Or St Paul, 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection....'

So may God bless all of you, this Easter, as we celebrate the resurrection. And may he strengthen you, in this in-between time, in faith and hope and love. May he bring healing to all affected by COVID-19. May he protect our wonderful health workers, and may he have mercy on all those struggling with poverty, loneliness, anxiety or conflict. For Jesus Christ is risen. He is present with us, by his Holy Spirit. He is at work, and He will never leave us or forsake us, as we abide in faith, hope & love, 'and the greatest of these is love'. *Amen*