

Easter Sunday Sermon 2020

What on earth can I write this year? By the time Easter Sunday comes I am always tired. They say Christmas “must be your busy time Vicar”, but Holy Week is harder. At Christmas, as long as you start with “Once in Royal” and end with “O come all ye faithful” everyone will go home happy. Easter takes a bit more effort. Palm Sunday is different to Maundy Thursday, different to Good Friday, different to Easter Sunday.

But not this year. The days have almost merged into one, and there has been less effort required. (The person who has made the most effort is Caroline, who got 608 Easter cards in the post by Wednesday morning. She texted me at 0846 saying “just got the last lot in the post for the 9 am collection”. I told her we are starting on the Christmas cards tomorrow - she’s not amused. Thanks very much from all of us). So many people have had to do so much less, at least as far as church is concerned. I chatted to my friend Shaun who is organist at Blackburn Cathedral on Friday. Both of us were trying to understand how we feel when our job is, in so many ways, changed out of all recognition - and both of us are struggling.

For the disciples, the men and women who had followed Jesus, they were in the same position. They had spent three years with this man they believed to be the Messiah. They were no longer fishermen, tax collectors, normal humans with normal jobs - they were disciples, healers, part of something amazing. And suddenly that had changed, and had changed for ever. Everything they had worked for had gone. Tomorrow they would have to go home, back to the family, could they get their old job back? How many people would say “I told you so, that Jesus, he was as useless as the rest of those so-called Messiahs.”

Those disciples, and the women of the group, they must have been shattered. The emotional roller-coaster they had travelled. Most of us are shattered, despite the fact we haven’t done much. We are the fortunate people, the ones who have nice homes, big gardens (I will never complain about the size of the Vicarage garden again), stable incomes. Why are we tired? The emotional cost of all this - can you remember when you last had a good night’s sleep? This is perfectly normal - and we must make sure we allow ourselves, and others, to get the rest they need.

As well as tiredness, there is anger. I am angry that my daughter and so many other people in the caring professions are having to work without the correct equipment - and I am angry at the failings of those who have caused it. I am spitting feathers at Matt Hancock blaming NHS staff for mis-using and wasting it. I am angry at those who clap on a Thursday evening, but who have allowed

the NHS to be run-down, under-funded, sold-off, dismantled, and under-valued for the last decade. Of course a pandemic is going to challenge everything and there will always be failures, but we should have been better prepared.

I am angry that our Society has become so unjust, that we are divided between those of us wealthy and secure enough to sit in our gardens, and those who have to continue to work because normal life is so insecure that they can't rely on being paid, or receiving sick pay, or even being able to afford the food they need. Our son Harry is part of a project in Newcastle, they have delivered 283 food parcels this week - I have enough food that Julie and I can keep going until we reach the final Fray Bentos steal and kidney pie, his clients have nothing until the parcel arrives. Next week they are planning to deliver 600. May God forgive us for allowing our country to become a place like this.

I suspect the disciples were angry too. Angry at the people around them who had ignored the message of Jesus, angry that those who had shout "Hosanna" had also shouted "Crucify", angry at their religious leaders who had failed to recognise the Messiah, and angry at God who had allowed all this to happen.

I am afraid. Afraid for myself, for those I love, for so many people. I talk to a close friend from University days. His son and daughter-in-law are both Intensive Care doctors working together. 40% of their patients are leaving the Unit in a bag. That's enough - I can't cope with any more fear.

The disciples know fear. I haven't had to watch my friend, my Lord, my son being arrested. I haven't seen him whipped. I haven't heard the nails being driven in, and watched as life drained away, slowly, agonisingly. I'm not hiding in an Upper Room, scared that they are coming for me. Those disciples lived in fear, and - not surprisingly - were afraid when the tomb was empty. What is happening now? What does the future hold?

I'm glad that we are offered John's gospel - Mary Magdalene in the garden. I can cope with gardens. I can understand "supposing him to be the gardener". It makes sense. I love the way that the Garden of Eden, where evil separated Adam and Eve from God, I love the way that that separation is reversed, in a garden.

I often use the poems of George Herbert, and I wrote a meditation on several of them which we used in Holy Week last year, and which has been on the website for Holy Week this year - and I won't move it in a hurry, so you can always use him over the next few weeks - <https://www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk/holy-week-2020-geirge-herbert>

For those of you who don't know, he's the chap who wrote "King of glory, King of peace", "Let all the world in every corner sing" and "Teach me, my God and King". He was born in Montgomery, Wales on 3 April 1593, he came from a wealthy family. He was tutored at home, then went to Westminster School and to Trinity College Cambridge. He was a Fellow of the College by 1614, rose to the heights of University Orator (the man whose job it was to be the University's spokesmen) and an MP. After only a few years he left it all, and was ordained in 1625 or 1626. He became Prebendary of Leighton Bromswold in Huntingdonshire, then, in 1630, moved to Bemerton near Salisbury. He died there on 1 March 1633. We remember him as priest, poet and musician.

Here is his poem, Easter:

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
 Without delays,
 Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
 With him mayst rise:
 That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
 His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
 With all thy art.
 The cross taught all wood to resound his name,
 Who bore the same.
 His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
 Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
 Pleasant and long:
 Or, since all music is but three parts vi'd
 And multipli'd,
 O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
 And make up our defects with his sweet art.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;
 I got me boughs off many a tree:
 But thou wast up by break of day,
 And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The sun arising in the East,
 Though he give light, and th' East perfume;
 If they should offer to contest
 With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
 Though many suns to shine endeavour?
 We count three hundred, but we miss:
 There is but one, and that one ever.

I love the image of the risen Lord taking you by the hand and, after death, we will rise with him. As his death "calcined thee to dust" - calcine being a word used in alchemy, reducing a base substance into powder in the hope of refining it into gold. We will be made more than gold.

In the second verse crucifixion, that hideous death, is made into music - Christ's stretched sinews the strings of a lute, his wooden cross the soundboard. Heart, lute and Spirit make music. The basis of harmony is the three part chord - this is music on a new level.

In Herbert's day the flower arrangers did not come in on Easter Eve and weave their magic. Instead you would collect flowers and boughs off the banks and trees on your way to church. But Christ rose at break of day, bringing his perfumes - a reference to the spices carried by the women? The morning sun, the dawn in the East, these are as nothing compared to his resurrection, and the resurrection we will share. 300 days, almost a full year - but beside this day, they all pale into insignificance.

Fifty years ago, on 11 April 1970, Apollo 13 was launched. I was 8, and I was fascinated by it all. I had made a scrapbook of cuttings about Apollo 11 and 12, and I was excited by this one. You will remember the phrase "Houston, we have a problem", and I was old enough to realise that something had gone wrong. I remember saying my prayers for the crew, and I remember how happy I was when they splashed down safely. I have a DVD of the 1995 film starring Tom Hanks, and I will watch that sometime this weekend. It is one of the few films that always makes me cry - and Julie will say "but you know it ends happily, why do you cry".

Humans can do incredible things, and we need to do them now. We do it in human strength, and in the strength of the resurrection. The Apostle Paul puts it better than I can in Romans 8:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God

who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Peter Barham, 11 April 2020