

On Wednesday evening I was sitting here in church as part of the Tenebrae service, looking out through the windows into the cemetery behind. It was twilight and we had only the down lights on around the edges of the church, with candles burning on the altar. Through the central window, in the most amazing light showed the depth of green of the grass, and the sky which looked it was preparing for a storm danced with various shades of blues and purples. A baby magpie was playing in the grass beside the graves. We had been sitting in silence, having just heard Psalm 10 read *'Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble¹?* And then we started to sing – Bless the Lord my Soul and Bless God's Holy name – and I have to say I felt quite overwhelmed. The beauty – the wonder – the quiet – the grace – felt like you could taste it. It felt like a glimpse into God's Kingdom – a glimpse of hope.

The on Thursday morning, Fr Laurence I headed in to St Paul's cathedral for the Chrism Mass. I love that liturgy – again a story of promise – but also of calling us to account. Each Priest re-affirms their vows as we prepare to walk the way of the cross in the coming days. Rather than waiting for the hope of the Easter message – we are called to affirm our faith and commitment to serving God before the journey begins! Like Peter we are asked to say 'yes Jesus – we will never deny you' knowing that we are fallible- and like Peter we too will make mistakes.

I have found the last three days incredibly moving – more than usual actually which has taken me a little by surprise. This started partly on Wednesday night with the wonder of the evening sky, but was heightened as we processed into St Paul's cathedral and past the sculpture installation there at present.

On the top step of St Paul's is the sculpture - Ecce Homo by Mark Wallinger. It is a life-sized sculpture of Jesus Christ, hands bound behind his back and wearing a crown of barbed wire. The sculpture first appeared on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in 1999, and will stand at the top of the west steps of the Cathedral during Holy Week and Easter. It is very confronting – so small against the doors of the cathedral – and yet so much dignity and hope. It presents Christ as a lone man standing before a hostile crowd, as he awaits judgement and just moments before he was sentenced to death.

When as clergy at the end of the service, we stood as a gathered group before the steps – some 400 of us – and the Bishop blessed us – with the bound Jesus beside him – the essence of these three days seem to be personified. In the midst of the crowd – longing for hope – longing for an end to war and violence – stands alone Jesus offering an alternative response to violence and power.

¹ Psalm 10: 1

I think the poignancy for much of the last three days has been for me in the intersection between the liturgies and meditation in church on what happened to Jesus, and the fear of the communities in which he lived; with the ongoing news updates of escalating signs of war between the USA and North Korean, as well as new developments in the Middle East this week.

To hear the stories of a community which feared the Kingdom of God, because it was not about the power which is offered in this world but rather is about a community, a kingdom where all can be free, where we do not fear the other, where our response to uncertainty is not violence. Violence begets Violence – and yet the Easter message stands at odds with this. Jesus came that all might have life – and have it to its fullness. In all the violence that we have heard Jesus experience over the last week – he does not respond with violence or even anger or hate – but rather he loves even more. As I said on Good Friday – it is not logical to us – but it should offer us hope.

Yesterday morning when I came into church at about 8.30am it was silent, and all was stripped away. This bare space held only the cross in the window behind me. The silence of Saturday – the waiting and wondering if a different outcome is possible. And then in the hours that followed, as Liz and Sue arranged flowers – and things throughout the building slowly went back into their usual places, a freshness, and newness a hopefulness began to dawn. By the time we made it to look into the fire at dusk last night and hear the message proclaimed that Jesus was risen – even the spring blooms seemed to be taking on a fresh glow.

And this is the hope of this morning – the wonder of the glorious day and celebration of Easter. That whatever we see, whatever we hear in the news – God is alive – God is with us – God still offers an alternative. God calls us to love and to transform the world. Sometimes I wonder if might tire of me using this phrase – but I do believe it with all of my heart and soul – God calls us to love and it is that love that will transform the world. But like much of the Easter Mystery it defies logic and calls us to let go of our preconceived ideas and see God, and ourselves afresh. And if this seems difficult we can be reassured that we are not the first people who think they have worked out Jesus or God only to have to re-evaluate what they thought or feel.

The story which we heard from John's gospel this morning is filled with all the emotions of life (and in a sense the emotions of this week) in a few short verses and it makes it clear that nothing will ever be the same again:

- 1st Mary approaches the tomb, almost in fear because she will see the body of her Lord
- But then the body is gone, and she is frighten and angry
- But this fear turns to grief as she mourns his lose

- And then Jesus appears and Mary is surprised that Jesus is alive, and she recognises him - but to our dismay, and certainly Mary's, the risen Christ says, "Do not hold onto me."

Mary cannot touch him – Jesus is not back to stay – he is just making the point that he is returning to the Father – things have still changed!

I suspect we can see much of ourselves in Mary – after all the turmoil of the last few days she would like it to return to normal. But following Jesus is a never-ending process of losing him the moment we have him captured, only to discover him anew in an even more unmanageable form. Every time we try to place Jesus back in the tomb he is gone, taking us to a new place.

When we take that first step and affirm that we believe in God, when we say in Baptism that we are Christian and commit to following Christ – our faith does not stay in that moment, our faith is constantly growing and changing as we learn more about God and ourselves. If our faith this Easter Sunday is the same that it was last year at this feast then we have missed the point – Jesus does not want us to cling to our memory of him, or of how our faith once was – he wants us to grow and change, to go out and tell – to be the people we are created to be.

The Resurrection does not bring Jesus back to his friends to the way they were. So we cannot cling to how faith has been – we have to allow it grow and fill us – as we grow and change too. The way out of the darkness is only by moving ahead. And the only person who can lead the way is the Christ. The point of the Gospel story and its question to us is **not** 'do we believe in Jesus but have we encountered the risen Christ?'

I think I have said before my old boss used to say (with regular monotony) "we spend Holy week and Easter together once a year recognising the heart of our faith and then we spend the next 51 weeks living it out together" – for in essence, each time we encounter Christ afresh we learn to live out our communal life in different ways too!

So how have we encountered the Risen Christ and how will we respond – how will we be changed?

Personally this Holy Week and Easter I have been challenged by God to take each step on its own – not to race ahead to where I think God is, but to actually wait and let God do the leading. I have been challenged to notice where God is here in a new way and I have found it quite profound. Each of us will have encountered God over this weekend in different ways and we are invited to notice this encounter, to notice how it might change us, and maybe even have the courage to share our experience with others.

As we gather at this table together today may our praise for the risen Christ be unending; may we be aware of ourselves – and where God is calling us; may we be

filled with the joy of Mary at the sight of her teacher – Jesus; and may we be so changed that like Mary we want to run from this place and tell the whole world of the vision of our Saviour.

We are the people of God in this place who are changed forever. We are all welcome and Christ is in our midst. Alleluia!! So let us celebrate. Amen.