

How do we make sense of our world? How do we make sense of the state of violence, the escalation of war; or even things that are maybe more personal to us? How do we make sense of grief or challenges? I am often intrigued that rarely do we ask one another how we make sense of our joy. It seems that we only ever have to make sense of things which are challenges – which is odd really because it says something about the value we give to experiencing joy and hope!

As I mentioned at the end of our service last week a friend reminded me recently of the quote by Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox theologian and teacher, he has written a lot about the desert teachers, and also about the way of life – that is the life of Christianity. In his book *The Orthodox Way* he says *“We see that it is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.”*¹

Making sense of God then, maybe is a time when we focus on unpicking the nature of wonder and joy; and of course the great challenges as to why evil continues even within the mystery of God.

Today as we come to the 4th Sunday of Easter, we don't hear another account of the resurrection but an account of some of Jesus teaching which highlights who Jesus is. A passage which John wrote for the early church to help them make sense of the resurrection and Jesus teaching all in one statement. But like much of John's writing it asks more questions than it answers. What is it that John is trying to help us make sense of?

This passage of a 'good shepherd' one who is prepared to lay down their life, and then be lifted up again, for John expresses the willingness and wonder in which Jesus enters into the crucifixion and the resurrection. John is wanting his audience to understand that Jesus is not questioning the journey that lays ahead; rather he is embracing the wonder of it.

John also writes in a way that confirms that Jesus is offering a new type of leadership. Firstly Jesus knows those who follow – not just their names – but knows his followers like we know a close member of our own family. We don't just know the bits a person chooses to show – rather being known by the day by day living in the same space with someone. The other key feature is that as a leader who knows his sheep or followers – Jesus is willing to suffer for the good of the whole community. This is also a new notion to many followers – the experience of most was that leaders were not prepared to suffer for others.

Though today's passage is situated during Jesus' ministry, the gospel of John addresses the needs of specific communities in the post resurrection era. Scholars believe that the gospel was written around 90 CE, a time when the Johannine

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/141955.Kallistos_Ware

community was facing harassment². It was also a time when they were seeking new models of leadership having experienced the leadership of those who had abandoned them during the seize of Jerusalem in AD70. John is giving this new community clarity about the type of leader that Jesus is, and also the type of followers he is seeking. Jesus knows those who seek him and follow – but also Jesus will not abandon them. And at the heart of the Johannine gospel is the message that *Jesus was not only a living, spiritual presence who was worshipped as God in the liturgical assembly of the community but he was also the model for church leadership and a model of the abundance of God.*

John writes to help his community make sense of the world in which they live; to make sense not just of the hardship but also the wonder. At its centre our Christian journey is the same; we exist, we are to make sense of the wonder of God as we struggle with those things which cause us pain.

One of the dangers of Easter is that we over simplify the complexity and wonder of the nature of God which is revealed within the passion.

The danger of oversimplifying the Easter message is that we simplify the Christian message into glib statements of questions and answers – or worse we feel that there must be an answer for every situation. But Christianity is not about answers – it is about a way of life; and I guess I wonder if part of that way of life is not just about pondering and interceding for the evil and struggles in the world; but also pondering and interceding for all that is amazing too.

A friend during the week posted on social media an aerial photo taken, I think in the south pacific. The picture was of a tiny fishing boat with 4 people in it; below the boat what can be seen from the air is a giant blue whale swimming under the boat. It is like the boat is half way along its back – though the whale is much deeper in the water and at least 50 times larger than the boat! At first glance you only see the boat – a tiny boat on a vast ocean – it is only when you step back you realise that the whale is there in all its beauty and grandeur.

Too often in our faith we focus in on the little boat – the issues and concerns which are immediate to our mind – those things which are closest to our heart – it can be hard for us to make the space to see all that surrounds us – or as Ware puts it *make us progressively aware of a mystery.*

We are on a journey. It is not an individual journey. It is one we make together, even when it makes us feel uncomfortable. It is one we share with many others, even when we don't agree with each other. It is one where we might reveal more of ourselves that we might have liked. But one of the joys of the resurrection is that it invites us to see everything afresh.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3628

This week marks 5 years since I have been here at St Anne's. I have found it a strange week, partly the weather makes you just want to enjoy the sun; but also in terms of 'what am I doing here!' When I arrived I committed to staying five years, and now that time is up – but it feels like our journey in earnest is just beginning. The question I have had this week however is how do you reflect and evaluate time in a vocation. Do I focus on what hasn't worked; what frustrates; or is it a time to celebrate what has been achieved? And is it as simple as either of those things – like faith the danger is to focus in on measurable outcomes rather than the mystery which is a community of faith. Thankfully I have not been bought into the court as Peter was in the Acts reading we heard earlier. In that recount, Peter is asked to account for what he has been doing and in whose name. Peter faced death in the way that he answered the question; our achievement as a parish does not have such a violent potential outcome to the questions we are asked. Though of course if we are not careful in our care of the community we could destroy it.

John called the early church to *love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action*³. And I do hope that this is what we do; I think this is then the way that we make sense of the world – both those things which challenge us and bring us grief; as well as those things which bring us hope and joy. I think to it is probably the key to how we reflect on what we are doing!

On Friday night I was talking with a member of our congregation and we were reflecting that so often what we see in the desolation of parts of London is a loss of hope. There are many people who no longer have a sense that things could improve. It may be hard for those of us who live with the joy of possibility to understand what it means to live without hope and it is why giving simple faith answers is a dangerous thing to do. But what our faith does invite to do is to help each other see the wonder and mystery of God; and in seeing such wonder we also get a glimpse of hope. A hope that is sustaining.

The promise of the Easter message is that we are people who are known and loved by God; and that God's gift to us is abundant love. Our readings today are intended to flesh out this promise so that we might not lose hope – and that we might be invited to have the courage to know ourselves and to know each other – helping us make sense of the world.

They all sound like simple statements – but they are not always simple to live out because they embrace the mystery and wonder of God – something which is meant to be beyond our reasoning – *for God is greater than our hearts.* ⁴ Amen.

³ 1 John 3: 18

⁴ 1 John 3: 20b