

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 danced with various shades of blue. We had been sitting in silence, having just heard Lamentations 1 read *'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!?' 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, 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 poignant – more than usual which has taken me a little by surprise. This started partly on Wednesday night with the wonder of the evening, but was heightened as we processed out of St Paul's cathedral and having the Bishop of London not only bless us from the steps as we left; but she waved to us. This very human action, this greeting, or farewell – felt like this was a journey we are on together, rather than something we are sent away to do.

Then on Thursday evening as we began our journey through the triduum, the power of washing others feet, in sharing in the Eucharist, and then as we walked down into the chapel to sit in the garden, we heard the Gospel account of Jesus weeping before God, longing for an alternative. I was shocked to find that this brought me to tears, the pain of Jesus experience seemed so close.

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; and how it mirrors some of our experience of uncertainty as a nation, and also who we scapegoat in our own time; and what we value.

I was reminded of an episode of Big Bang Theory, in it the lead character Sheldon (a physicist) , says to his friend Howard (an engineer) “ *Howard you misunderstand me, it is not that I don't think you good at what you do, I think you are a very good at what you do, it is just that I don't think what you do is worth doing!*”

Is all this liturgy – which we are very good at, is this story still worth it?

On Friday evening as I was locking up to go home after all the liturgies when I came into the church space it was silent, and all was stripped away. This bare space held only the cross in the window behind me. The silence of Friday night – the waiting and wondering if a different outcome is possible. And then on Saturday morning there was a hum of activity 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 – God is alive – God is with us – God still offers meaning and hope – God is still worth it!

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 frightened and angry
- But this fear turns to grief as she mourns his loss
- 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?' – 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 that faith is worth the challenge. 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.

I was struck again this morning vision we heard in the ancient text we heard from Isaiah this morning – which in a sense is the promise of Easter

*'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating'*¹

What is it that God is creating in us? How might we have the courage to grasp it and embrace the challenge of change – whether that is change in attitude, or if it is how we change the way we live to protect our natural environment and care of the earth.

As we gather at this altar 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 Jesus; and may we be so changed that like Mary we want to run from this place and tell the whole world of what we have encountered! For this journey of faith is worth it, and God will continue to change us and inspire us – so let us celebrate. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 65: 17-18a