

Sermon

Sunday 26 April 2020

Lesson

St Luke 24: 13 – 35

The lockdown continues. I hope that you are managing to survive this testing time, whether it is through phone calls, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Zoom, newspapers, jigsaws, reading, indoor exercises, walking or perhaps a new appreciation of solitude. As a church community we sorely miss the opportunity to be together each week: the nourishment afforded by being in the sanctuary and worshipping with others and the comfort of conversation, smiles and laughter.

In prayer, we remember key workers: nurses, doctors, shop assistants, teachers, funeral directors and, of course, our politicians and civil servants, as well as many others. We offer a blessing for those we know and those of our own congregation. We remember also those whose loss of a loved one, whose bereavement, has been made all the more painful because the funeral service was restricted to direct family, with friends and the wider family unable to be present to offer support. We are mindful of those for whom home is not a warm, loving, happy and safe environment: we pray for those who suffer physical or psychological abuse.

We have been blessed by glorious sunshine and clear night skies. It is good to see flowers blossoming, buds on trees and hear the melodic

cacophony of birdsong ringing out each day. On daily walks it is a pleasure to greet other travellers joyfully and a treat to meet someone we know, a familiar face: a brief conversation is enjoyed at two metres apart! This week I was particularly pleased to hear Professor Jason Leith, the National Clinical Director and advisor to the Scottish Government, offer a fulsome appreciation of the role and work of faith communities across Scotland at this time of crisis. At St Columba and Lochside through the care of our Elders for their district, for the ongoing management of the Church, and the continuing provision of the foodbank at Lochside, we are helping to support one another and the wider community.

Over the course of this lockdown so much of our regular pattern of life, activities which we would otherwise have taken for granted, have



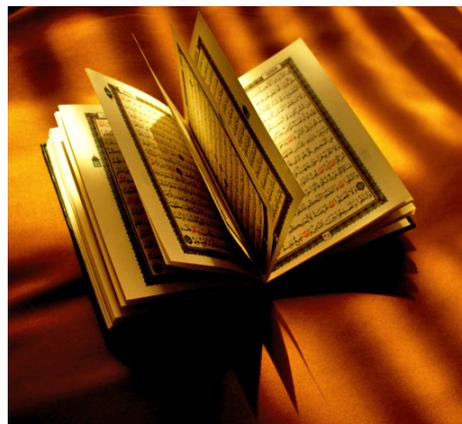
been lost or have had to be done in a different way. The Christian community across the world lost so much of its Holy Week reflections and Easter celebrations, whether on 12 April or, in the Orthodox tradition, on 19 April. The eight days of the Jewish Passover from the evening of 8 April to the end of 16 April was also

markedly changed. Rabbis spoke of celebrating their first Zoom Seder. With amusement, some spoke of ‘Zoomover’ rather than Passover. The Passover is the Jewish remembrance of the biblical

story of God leading their ancestors, the Hebrew slaves, out of Egypt. As part of that story, at each Passover meal, Jewish families across the world gathered in their homes to recite and hear the words of God, ‘I will pass over you and no plague shall destroy you.’ The Israelites were told to go into their houses, stay there, and not come out until the danger had passed. At Passover, Jewish families eat lamb as they did on the first Passover. The choice of lamb connects the Passover meal, the saving of the Hebrew people, with the story in Genesis of Abraham and Isaac, when God provided a ram for the sacrifice in place of the young boy Isaac. This same underlying narrative is used by the Christian community: Jesus is the Lamb of God.

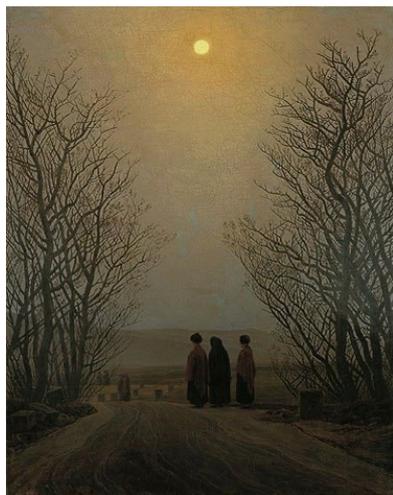
Yesterday on the Jewish Sabbath, Isaac, the youngest son of Daniel Finkelstein, had his Barmitzvah. Barmitzvah is a coming of age ritual in which a Jewish boy becomes accountable for his actions: he is ‘a son under the law or commandment’. Earlier Finkelstein, a member of the House of Lords and columnist for *The Times*, said that the party planned for afterwards has had to be postponed but that his son would still read passages from the Torah, albeit online and from home. The Torah is the first five books of our Old Testament.

Life has also changed for Muslims. This week marked the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan. In his message to Muslims in the UK and across the Commonwealth, the Duke of Rothesay spoke of being moved greatly by the many stories of Muslims working together with Sikhs, Christians and others to help support members of their



communities. He spoke of the pain of Muslims being unable to attend their mosques to break the fast, to share the *iftar* meal together with their families and wider community. On several occasions, I have participated in the *iftar* meal: people of different faiths and none sit together to share food. The Duke concluded his message with the Islamic greeting, ‘Ramadan Mubarak’ (Blessed Ramadan). Ramadan is also known as the month of the Qur’an because it was this month in which the Islamic scripture was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. During Ramadan, Muslims place a heavy emphasis on the Qur’an through daily recitations, reflections and night prayers. For the first time, *iftar* night prayers will be broadcast over Zoom.

It is striking that the three Abrahamic faiths place central importance



upon their holy texts: the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. Scripture is multi-layered. The mystics say that the stories of Scripture have an outer shell. With imagination, we must find our way in, reach beneath the surface meaning, enter into the story and let it come alive with all its

possibilities, connections and depth. In the Gospel of Luke, two followers of Jesus walked together on the road to Emmaus. The name 'Emmaus' means 'warm spring'. As they walked, Jesus drew near to them, though they did not recognise Him. In their bereavement and distress, Jesus spoke to them and, through the Scriptures, brought them comfort, solace and reassurance. Later, Jesus broke bread with them and their eyes were opened. They said, 'Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?' For those followers, the experience of Emmaus was that of a warm spring welling up within them. Their encounter with Jesus and Jesus speaking through the Scriptures left them nourished, healed and changed for ever.

The priest and poet George Herbert described Holy Scripture as 'infinite sweetness'. He called the Bible 'the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort'. We are to let our hearts suck every letter. It is honey: delicious and medicinal; a

precious resource for the open and praying soul. The more secular we have become in the west, the less familiar we are with the art of poetry, the more the Bible has become an increasingly difficult book to read and appreciate. It is difficult to read and 'believe' stories of the resurrected Jesus appearing in rooms through closed doors or in His lifetime walking on water. Yet, with imagination and an understanding of how the Jewish tradition wrote theology, we learn that Scripture is a poem that requires some degree of concentration. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said that 'God' is a one-word poem. We need to get beneath the surface meaning of Scripture.

Walk the road to Emmaus yourself, in a quiet moment, reflective mood, in meditation, let Jesus draw near and walk with you. Be aware of His Presence. Let the warm spring of His voice well up within you. Receive from His hand the broken bread. Jesus is our medicine and completion.

Amen.

Note from Session Clerk

I know that, for a host of reasons, you will be missing your Church. Life is just not the same when you are unable to attend Sunday services and Church related events. None of us knows for how long this period of lockdown will last. For those of you concerned about the position of our employees I am pleased to tell you that none of them will lose their jobs or lose out financially as a result of the lockdown.

For those of you who may be concerned that you are not able to fund the Church's ongoing financial commitments by reason of the fact that you are unable to come to Church, some options that you might want to consider have been detailed in a separate item on the website in the Current Information section under the heading 'Options for Offerings'. I suspect that many of you will be putting money aside so that when we do eventually get back to a degree of normality you will be able to make good that which you would have paid in normal circumstances.

Please do not be concerned about the financial wellbeing of the Church during this difficult period in all of our lives. It is there for you now and it will be there for you in better times.

Bob Bartholomew