

Sermon

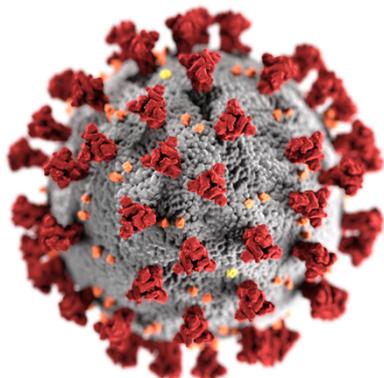
Easter Sunday 2020

Lesson

St Matthew 28: 1 – 10

Across the world, over 100,000 people have died of COVID-19. At the time of writing, over 389,000 have recovered. The lockdown has undoubtedly placed considerable strain on individuals and families, not least because of job insecurity, mental health and domestic abuse. These are sore and distressing times. It was particularly shocking to learn of the Prime Minister's admission to St Thomas' Hospital and, the following day, his transfer to the intensive care unit. Thankfully, it seems that Mr Johnson is on the mend. For most of the duration of this lockdown, we have been blessed by sunshine and blue skies. That said, the confinement is particularly bad, surely, for those living in small flats with young children. Let us hope that our return to some degree of normality comes soon.

Some commentators suggest that, once the worst of the pandemic is over, the world will not go back to business as usual but that, in some



ways, our value system and economic order will be changed. I am sceptical about that.

However, it is certainly true that the virus has not stopped at borders or walls and people

from all sections of society have been infected and affected. The outpouring of appreciation for the NHS has been unbelievable! It is taking colossal efforts on the part of governments, including our own, to inject billions upon billions of pounds into their economies to avert a catastrophic employment and health disaster. Some of the businesses in our country and local community may not survive because their cashflow has stopped. Let us remember and pray for them. How will the world's poorest communities fair?

As followers of Jesus, it has been a tremendous loss to have no services of worship during Holy Week and no services on the morning of Easter Sunday. There are virtual services and there are sermons online, but it is not the same. Thank God for the services on BBC Radio and TV. Over many years, I have always found it deeply moving to walk with Jesus along the road between Bethany



and Jerusalem and sit with Him in His final hours. It is profoundly moving to be at the foot of the cross during His crucifixion and in the moment of His death. Holy Saturday is that moment in human experience when we feel ourselves utterly alone, abandoned, ashamed, failures, with no friends and no God. One of the most precious memories I have of this pandemic is the sacred image of Pope Francis offering prayers in St Peter's Square on Friday 27 March. Alone in the vast emptiness and rain, Francis prayed for an end to the virus. He said that, 'For weeks now it has been evening'. In this unexpected and turbulent storm, the Pope said:

We have realised that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.

In our Gospel lesson, we read the drama of the first day of the week.

It was at dawn, at the first appearance of the sun's light, that the women made their way to the tomb. In the poetry and mythology of Matthew, the earth shook as it had done on Good Friday. On Friday as Jesus died, the earth shook, rocks were split open, and the saints, the followers of Jesus who had died, were raised. On Sunday morning, an angel appeared. In the Book of Daniel, it is said that the great prince, the angel Michael will appear when the dead are raised. Though the guards were overcome with fear, as dead men, the women did not flee. The angel, whose appearance was as lightning, told the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead. As the women left the tomb, they encountered the Risen Christ.

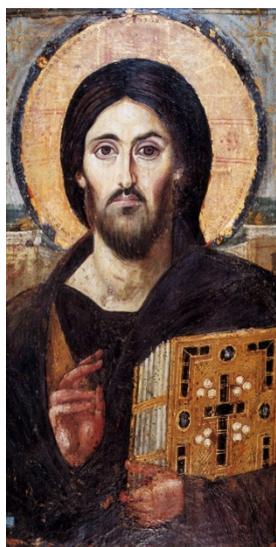
What does it mean to encounter Christ, to see Jesus? The

Benedictine nun, Maria Boulding, wrote of people encountering God

through their reflective reading of Scripture. Citing the psalms, she said:

My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you....When I remember you upon my bed, I muse on you through the watches of the night....in the shadow of your wings I rejoice....When I awake I shall be filled with the vision of your presence....In the morning I plead and watch before you.....

After patient practice, for some, silent prayer becomes a solace, a place of spiritual shelter and renewal in daily life. The Islamic Sufi mystic, Rumi, said that, ‘The quieter you become, the more you are



able to hear’. For others, the medicine of Scripture meditatively read becomes a doorway into the

Divine. *Stand at the tomb, hear the angel speak, walk away and let yourself encounter Jesus on the*

path. If we can, we are to practise Presence: to still

ourselves, even for short, fleeting moments, in

which we stop looking at the world, turn away from the many

distractions of the everyday life, and be quiet. Listen to our

breathing; listen to our heartbeat. We are to empty ourselves that we

may be filled by a sense of Presence. The fourteenth century mystic

Meister Eckhart said that, like Mary, Christ is to be ‘conceived’ in us and we are to ‘give birth’ to Jesus in our lives. This intimate language reveals the intensity of encounter. We are not to look for a vision of Christ that can be recorded on an iPhone. The visions of the women, the apostle Paul and the disciples were apparitions; they were inner visions, tender moments of inner experience. In the Orthodox tradition, Christians across the world find comfort and spiritual nourishment from gazing into icons, like the one here of Christ Pantocrator, Christ ruler of the universe. Let the face of Jesus, His eyes, bestow upon you a sense of His Presence, His peace, His shalom.

The resurrection account of Matthew was written much later than the letters of Paul. Matthew’s account is theology; it is rich, imaginative poetry to convey the truth about Jesus. In his letters and teaching, Paul makes no mention of the women, the angel of the Lord or the empty tomb. Paul’s emphasis is on the spiritual body, not a physical body raised from the dead. The apostle spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor without mentioning the empty tomb or the stories of the

physical resurrection. He spoke of his inner vision of Jesus, a vision which those who were with him did not see. We encounter Christ within us. God is an inward experience.

The Jesuit priest, Alfred Delp, was executed by the Nazis in 1945.

During his final months in prison, he wrote many reflections and meditations. At no point did he escape the hopelessness of his situation. During his trial, the Church and Jesuits were slandered and the outcome was a foregone conclusion.



There was no escape for Father Delp. He asked, ‘What is God’s purpose in all of this?’ Amidst his degradation, trial and suffering, he found peace. He experienced resurrection. A few days before he died, Delp wrote:

When I compare my icy calm during the court proceedings with the fear I felt, for instance, during the bombing of Munich, I realise how much I have changed. But the question keeps coming back – was this change the purpose of it all – or is this inner exaltation and help the miracle I asked for?

Delp spoke of inner exaltation and help. In the silence of the prison cell, in the soul which sentencing could not contain or condemn, Delp encountered resurrection. The outward circumstances had not changed; but for Delp as for the women, the disciples and Paul nothing would be the same again.

As we celebrate Easter, the beautiful belief in the Risen Christ, that God is in us, alive and renewing us, let me close with the words of Pope Francis from St Peter's Square in the face of pandemic:

'[Christ] is risen and is living by our side.....Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope'.

Amen.