

The Resurrection of Jesus: Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

Gentiles Hear the Good News: Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to [the gentiles] ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

Sermon

Over the past couple of weeks of Passiontide I have been very struck by how much the readings from the Old Testament book of Lamentations and the daily psalms, many of them also psalms of lament resonate with our current situation

On Monday this week Lamentations chapter 1 verses 1 and 4 gave us these words

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become [...] The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

While the strange limbo that that I find myself in is summed up well in words from psalm 130 that I quoted from a couple of weeks ago, in verses 5 and 6 the psalmist says “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

The repetition in these words convey to me the sense that his night has been a long one and even as he still writes he still waits for the dawn, but there is also the confident hope that light will dawn. Today of course we celebrate the dawn and the resurrection of Jesus the Light of the World, even if the light is a wintery one, it IS STILL LIGHT.

Archbishop John Sentamu said this week we must remember that we will be here only for a time, although it is now becoming clearer that time may be a long one. Certainly, as parish priests we are being told by our bishops that we need to regard this time of isolation and closed churches as a marathon, not a sprint, and pace ourselves and organise ourselves differently.

As followers of Christ we have always been pilgrims in a strange land, we are in the world but not of the world. We are called to set ourselves apart from the world, not to turn our back on it but to be salt and light to it by living differently. By living as God always intended us to and wants us to, rather than how the world would have us do. The world doesn't like it when we do, it didn't like it when Christ did either, that's why the authorities killed him.

But Jesus Christ showed that his way was God's way when he rose again from the dead, and after his ascension into heaven sent the Holy Spirit to empower everyone who wants to, to follow his teaching and live God's way.

In Jesus' time Israel was a nation that set itself apart from other nations. It worshipped a different God and operated by different rules. When Jesus came he didn't actually change that, but he did change many of the rules.

I deliberately gave you the readings back to front this morning to have a better sense of the flow of the readings. Three days after Christ's death the women and the disciples have begun to accept there will be a new normal without him when everything changes, and he comes back! With the new dawn on that Sunday morning the light of Christ returns to them, but it is a different light from the one they knew before. They cannot and do not just go back to the way they were before. And neither must we.

Like the Jews dependent on their traditions and their temple we have become dependent on our traditions and our churches. I am not saying that we will never go back to our churches. Those first believers, the disciples now apostles, did not abandon their temple and their synagogues, but they did begin using them differently and working in different ways and places. Our reading in Acts is of Peter teaching gentiles, not Jews, and telling them that Jesus died for everyone, including them, if they believed in Jesus, feared God, and lived as he wanted them to.

One day, I don't know when, we will get back into our churches. One day, I don't know when, we will be able to break bread together. Until then, we must hold fast to the words of Pope Benedict XVI who said "We are Christians only if we encounter Christ. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One, do we really become Christians"

It is not the hope of getting back to the way we were that will get us through this time of darkness, but hope in the steadfast love of Jesus, the Light of the World, the Risen One.

Amen