Easter Sunday Sermon 2021

On Friday morning I got up early as usual to let the dogs out, before settling down to say Morning Prayer. It is the very first thing I do each day, even before making that all important first cup of tea.

The liturgy for Morning Prayer follows a familiar pattern. But not on Good Friday, and not on Holy Saturday either. For apart from the Collect and the Lord’s Prayer, there are no prayers. There are no opportunities for praise, for thanksgiving, for intercession. There is no possibility of petitioning God for anything. There are psalms, scripture readings and canticles. All of which are awfully depressing. But there is no possibility of calling upon God. For in the Christian tradition, for just two days a year, God is dead.

This reality is brought home to me every year as we journey through Holy Week. I genuinely feel troubled by Christian denominations that do not mark Holy Week at all. For our faith, without this journey, is much diminished.

But this year, a much deeper truth struck a chord with me. I suddenly began to understand what this past year must have been like for the many millions of people in this country without a faith, without a belief in God. The loneliness and despair that we share momentarily in Holy Week through our liturgies and theology gives us a tiny insight into the depths of loneliness and despair that fill millions of lives every day. Days without encouragement; days without love; days and nights spent always alone; days without hope.

But not for us as Christian brothers and sisters. For as we have heard this morning once more, those familiar words from the angel in the tomb: “Do not be alarmed. Jesus has been raised from the dead. He is not here.”

Hope is restored on Easter Sunday, no longer simply for those who knew Jesus in His time and place in Palestine, but for everyone the world over.

It is only because of the resurrection that Jesus is transformed from an individual fixed in the first half of the first century into a universal Christ alive for evermore.

All it takes to own this truth, this hope, for ourselves, is the courage to believe.

As this country slowly emerges from lockdown this Easter, tens of thousands of households will be meeting up with one another for the first time for many months. Homes will be filled with the commercial paraphernalia of Easter, that seems to get ever closer to competing with Christmas for its irrelevance to the true meaning of the festival. Whoever heard of Easter trees until 2021?

And amongst all the chocolate and alcohol that will no doubt flow unceasing, there will be much genuine love and merriment. The despair and loneliness of the past year will be momentarily cloaked with relief and joy.

Yet in the absence of faith, in the absence of belief in something more, something transcendental, something divine, something that can shed light, meaning, interpretation onto the events through which we still live; without faith, all that loneliness and despair will resurface. All the problems of our communities are, after all, still with us. An Easter holiday weekend can distract us from those deep fissures in our lives and in our community, but it cannot offer any remedies. And it is into this vacuum, abyss even for some, that the Christian faith must speak in this Easter season.

Each of us has some experience of loneliness and despair this past year; let’s not pretend that our faith is so strong that we are impervious to the temptations of doubt. But therein perhaps lies one of the gifts that the church has to offer those who do not yet believe.

For we are not blind followers of faith, but reasoned individuals, that know the difference that faith makes; we know that faith helps us navigate the challenges of each day, it neither pretends they don’t exist nor obscures them through the smog of consumerism or addiction. Rather, we offer the challenges of life up to God and in return receive the strength of the Holy Spirit to keep going.

In the weeks and months to come, our church life will recover. That must be our focus this summer. Many will wish to return to church urgently; others will be hesitant or even fearful. We must nurture with great gentleness the confidence of faith to re-build our common life.

And then we must look outwards afresh and find news ways to encourage strangers to share in our life together. The context of each church community must determine the shape this takes, for the community around All Saints is quite different to the community around St Godwald’s. Our halls must become springboards for faith enquiry as well as sources of financial revenue.

This will be hard, for our church communities are much weakened by the virus. There are fewer of us than there were; our energies are low, and many of us might feel that our strongest days are behind us.

Yet we face none of this alone, for the resurrection hope lives within each one of us.

As we journey through Easter, allow that hope to find new a home in your heart; draw strength from it; seek inspiration from it; prepare yourselves afresh to celebrate Pentecost in seven weeks’ time, believing in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit that is ours by right of our baptism.

Within a matter of yards of this church and within yards of every church, are hearts crying out for something to believe in. That something is our faith. How might we respond?

Let me finish with a little story.

As a youngster I used to get home from school absolutely famished; tea was some way off so I would sneak into the kitchen, get a large spoon, open the tin of drinking chocolate and surreptitiously enjoy a huge spoonful of chocolate all on my own. My Mum never said a thing, not once did she question me how, for someone who disliked hot, milky drinks intensely, we seemed to get through so much hot chocolate. Of course, she knew.

The point of that anecdote is that our faith is not for private consumption, it’s not some delicacy we enjoy on our own or only in good company.

The hope of Easter is for sharing. That is the invitation God offers us this Easter Sunday.

I would like to ask each one of you to begin praying today, and every day, for one thing in particular. I’ve done this in another church with surprising results.

From today, please join with me in praying every day for God to draw new people to All Saints and St Godwald’s. And then, pray for us to have the grace, not simply to be welcoming to newcomers, but to be changed by their presence.

If we do this, by next Easter, there will be new faces amongst us; and we will all be renewed and refreshed by their arrival.

Believe me, God is faithful, He will hear us.

**Amen.**