

Readings for Easter Day

4th April 2021

First Reading: Acts 10:34-43

Peter began to speak to those assembled in the house of Cornelius: “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.”

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Gospel: St Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to

Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

A Reflection for Easter Day

Over the last couple of weeks, as we passed the anniversary of the first lockdown, it has been hard to escape any number of people sharing their experiences of the past year: the highs and lows, how they have adapted to the circumstances and uncertainty and dealt with the challenges. For many, it has been a time of turmoil and we are fortunate indeed if we have been largely unaffected.

When we think back to the events of the first Holy Week, those last few days of Jesus’ life on earth, we see that it was a time of turmoil too. After the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the mood quickly changed as the people turned against Jesus. As I mentioned last week, the shouts of ‘Hosanna!’ changed to ‘Crucify him!’ all too quickly. He became increasingly isolated, and finally abandoned and betrayed by his friends. For his disciples and other followers, there was despair as everything that had seemed so promising went so horribly wrong – a loss of hope, fear of the consequences, and ultimately on Good Friday the pain and desolation of loss ... of a son, a brother, a friend.

After such a week, one wonders what was going through the minds of the women as they went to the tomb on that first Easter morning - as they thought to perform a last act of love for their friend by anointing his body. We are told that they were wondering about who would roll away the stone at the entrance to the tomb - and that is slightly odd as it was an obvious practical difficulty that one might expect them to have resolved before setting out. But the account that Mark gives us emphasises the extraordinariness of what took place. The size of the stone that had already been rolled away. The young man in white – with heavenly authority, but not quite the angel reported in the other Gospels. He referred to Jesus as being of Nazareth and as having been crucified, emphasising his humanity, yet then saying that he had been raised. And there is the missing body. The young man also tells them that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee – a reminder that Jesus promised to do just this. It was certainly a lot to take in and is perhaps unsurprising that, in this account, the women fled in terror and told no-one.

Mark’s Gospel originally ended at this somewhat disquieting point: the disciples had fled, the women were terrified and no-one was saying anything. Yet, clearly, this was not the end of the story – if it had been, the Gospel would not have been written and we would not have heard it. But what are we to make of an ending with the witnesses silenced by fear? It isn’t what we usually think of on Easter Day. It was clearly bothersome for the early church, and endings were added that you will find in your Bibles, which describe the women telling others, and of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances.

However, if we look at the text that Mark gave us, ending here as he originally did, it is a story of good news, despite the women’s fear. The word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’ and Mark starts his Gospel with: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ (Mark 1:1). And he ends with good news: the young man announces Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, as he foretold, and that he will see them in Galilee as he promised he would. For Mark, who tends to provide the minimum of detail in his Gospel, this is sufficient and, importantly, it is not the end – the

future is left open. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus has shown that nothing is stronger than the power of God's love and, in that love, he will go ahead of the disciples into the future, providing direction and purpose.

Yes, the women may have fled in terror at this point. They would have been overwhelmed with grief by the events of the previous days and unable to comprehend such astonishing pronouncements. We probably all know that grief can distort our ability to see things as they really are. But, as I have already said, the story did not end with their silence. As they had time to stop shaking, to think, discuss and understand what they had seen and been told, they were empowered to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. Their faith overcame their fear.

We now know that, in the future that Mark left open in his account of the first Easter Day, there were many witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. In the passage from Acts, we find Peter bearing witness to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Both Peter and Cornelius had responded to visions from God that resulted in Peter speaking of Christ's life, death and resurrection from his own experience. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes of Christ's death and resurrection being central to the Gospel, the fulfilment of all that was foretold in the Old Testament scriptures, and citing the testimony of many eyewitnesses. And he tells his readers that it is through faith in this good news that we too will be raised.

The importance of eyewitness testimony is powerful and vitally important. It is through such testimony that the Gospel, the good news, has been handed down to us. As the first disciples, were called to continue the Gospel where Mark left off, so we are called to continue that eyewitness testimony in our own time and place, to tell of our own experience of God and hand on the good news to future generations. In the busyness of our daily lives, it can sometimes be hard to pay attention to where we encounter the divine, but it is nevertheless worth doing. Taking time at the end of a day to reflect on where we have felt God's presence or seen God's love in action can be a real encouragement, both to ourselves and others.

Some of you may have heard *The Moral Maze* on Radio 4 on Wednesday evening. This week's edition, entitled *The Meaning of Easter*, asked whether Easter should have a special meaning this year, beyond the religious narrative, a collective reflection on unity, togetherness and sacrifice as we start to take steps to freedom from the most recent lockdown. There was, of course, a diversity of opinion. One of the contributors, Rev'd Dr Rachel Mann, a Church of England priest, spoke of how the Easter story captures the heart of human living. It is a story of betrayal and broken friendships, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of death and life, of sacrifice (I paraphrase all that she said). It is amidst all that messiness of ordinary life that we will catch glimpses of the divine, if we are alert for them.

The first Easter day was a particular point in history, but Easter is an ongoing, lived experience for Christians. Christ continues to go ahead of us, showing us the way, and God is still in the business of resurrection, transforming lives and situations in the here and now as well as for eternity...if we will let him.