

King's College Chapel
Sermon for Easter Day 2016
The Dean

Anyone who has attended any of the wonderful concerts in our festival 'Easter at King's' will know that the events of Holy Week have been turned into art so exquisite as to leave us speechless, but also so agonizing as to pull us apart.

One tension that I particularly noticed was in the aria in Bach's St John Passion that meditates on the final word of Jesus from the cross. 'It is finished' is one English translation. 'Accomplished' is more like it. The Greek word is *tetelestai* and the German is *volbracht*. The Aria has an A - B - A structure. The 'A' parts are beautifully moving and dolorous. They depict Jesus dying with a sigh of resignation. At last, it is over. But in the middle there is an altogether more lively section which speaks of Jesus as a hero who has triumphed.

It may surprise you that I want to suggest that it is the middle section that is the more faithful to John's account. It is in Matthew and Mark that the crucifixion is sadness and suffering, abandonment and desolation. In Luke it is a more pacific matter in which Jesus gives up his spirit relatively calmly. But for John it is different again because for John the cross is the place where the full glory of God is seen. So in John there is resurrection in the crucifixion, just as there is Pentecost on Easter day when in the evening Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost'.

This Johanine approach is reflected in the old English poem the *Dream of the Rood*. Written, one might imagine, by a missionary monk seeking to explain Christianity to the bellicose and fractious Anglo-Saxons, the dream takes the perspective of a tree pressed into service as a cross that is one day astonished to see not a helpless felon dragged forward for crucifixion, but a bold young warrior who embraces his destiny with great courage, and triumphs not over others, but in heroic self-sacrifice. The result of this is redemption so complete that the tree is transfigured, bathed in light, bejeweled even, and seen as a sign of a way of life that contradicts the way of the world with its capitulation to raw power, and its collusion with the machinations of the deceitful.

So, which version of the death of Jesus do we believe in: the terribly suffering, abandoned Jesus of Matthew and Mark, the spiritual and calm Jesus of Luke, or the gloriously accomplishing Jesus of John? I hope you are not shocked if I say you don't have to decide. You have to live with all three.

This business of living with multiple perspectives is integral to the Christian faith. Ours would be a very different religion if there were only one gospel and not four which, for all their overlaps, often tell different stories, carry different theologies and imply different spiritualities. Christianity is a religion that has diversity built in from its inception. This is why reconciliation is a virtuous process for a Christian why and ecumenism is vital. We are not all the same in our interpretation of Christianity or implementation of its tenets, and none of us is in possession of the only correct perspective, or the ultimate version of the truth. We may believe and feel and know that we are close to the truth. But that doesn't stop someone who takes a very different approach, and draws different conclusions, being equally close.

Returning to the St John Passion, this makes me want to say that while Bach's aria *Es ist Volbracht* is defective as a bit of Biblical exegesis because it muddles up a Matthew's and John's very different understandings of the death of Jesus, it is a *very good* bit of theology. It conveys both pastoral truth and aesthetic depth and beauty. This is why it resonates with us so richly. For we often flip from one perspective, one mindset, one set of preoccupations, to another. When faced with the death on the cross we see *both* the suffering *and* the triumph; we see Jesus as *both* victim *and* hero. Just as, if the truth be told, when we think of ourselves we think of person who is sometimes good and sometimes not so good, sometimes splendid and sometimes a disgrace.

When it comes to the greatest mystery of all, the story of Easter day, we should not be surprised if we find different stories in the different gospels, or that they bring out from us different, or possibly contradictory thoughts, feelings and actions.

Even if you limit yourself to John's version of Easter – which begins with the mystery of the empty tomb, continues to the strange encounter in the garden when Jesus tells Mary not to touch him, moves on to the upper room when Jesus offers peace and bestows the Spirit, and ends with the encounter not with a great person of faith but with Thomas the doubter who is

encouraged to touch not only the body of Jesus but his very wounds – even if you limit yourself to this, you get a plethora of images and emotions.

Easter unsettles us by presenting us not just with a mystery but with *an abundance of mystery*. There is no point in wishing it were otherwise or in so cranking up the spiritual intensity that you require yourself to adopt some limited partial perspective as if it were the full truth, and then parade that around for all to see as evidence of your personal sanctity, wisdom, righteousness or whatever. Christianity doesn't easily harmonize as its story is so profound and its Scriptures are so irreconcilable – so full of the sort of agonizing tension that the John Passion so beautifully exposes.

Does this mean we are all doomed to the vapid agnosticism of shrugged shoulders and spiritual indifference, or the liberal hedonism that says eat drink and be merry for tomorrow the fundamentalists will be at the door?

Not a bit of it. Christianity is the religion that invites us to embrace mystery and uncertainty with hope and patience. There is gospel word for every occasion. There is healing for every malaise, even if the healing is itself agony. There is redemption for the worst of sinners, and there is hope for the most despairing. This is what Christianity, and it is all based on a faith which goes much deeper than words or dogmas but is in our guts, our bones, our hearts. This is faith that doesn't know all the answers but trusts that there *is* a God and that God is love and grace and that God reaches out to each and every human soul with transformative and healing compassion.

When we say that Christ is risen we mean that the stories of Jesus have convinced us that love of God is stronger than anything we can imagine, whether that is death or evil, or both, or anything else. It means that we believe that God's grace is a force for good that transcends all our models and examples and experiences. And it is for this reason that we proclaim a gospel of both of profound and abundant mystery and of deep, deep joy.

Alleluia Christ is risen!