

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Easter Day 2018

One of the many great things about the peculiar liturgical life of this Chapel is that we have as many people attending worship on Good Friday as on Easter Day. After all, the two days proclaim the same gospel, the same God, the same Jesus. The one focuses on the cross and the other on the empty tomb. The one is associated with lamentation and sadness and guilt; the other with joy and gladness and victory; on one we hear of betrayal and brutality, death and burial, on the other we hear of early morning messages, running races between the disciples, an absence where one would expect a presence, and misunderstandings in the garden and on the road to Emmaus.

There is less ambiguity on Good Friday. The story is told differently by the different evangelists, but there is no doubt how it will end. The man on the cross is going to die and be buried. The male disciples – with the exception of John – will forsake their friend. Desertion, desolation and dereliction: these are the words of the day. And it's clear what these things feel like, what they mean, and where they are headed.

Jesus dies and descends into hell. Hell is not, as is so often quipped, 'other people'. Hell is the absence of anyone who cares about you, and the absence in your own heart of any care or concern, never mind love, for anyone else. It's not something to which you are consigned. It's where you end up if you opt against love and truth and justice in your everyday decisions. Jesus goes there to reach out in love to those who are not loved and cannot love. It is the extreme edge of his mission. It is in hell that the resurrection begins.

So: 'If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above ... [and] ... put to death whatever in you is earthly'. That is to say - if you *believe in* the resurrection, and have glimpsed, or been touched by, the presence of the living and loving God, then you need to reorient yourself, and 'kill off' the toxic attitudes, desires and habits that take your life in the direction of isolation and hell.

The resurrection of Jesus is a gateway to a better way of living; one that is new, fresh, fulfilling and positive, and which leads us away from hell and towards the fellowship of the kingdom of heaven.

Positive though this is, it does involve some serious giving-up. We tend to associate giving-up with Lent, but our little Lenten disciplines, whether they involved refraining from chocolate or strong drink, are really just the warm-up exercises for serious Christian living; for living out the gospel of eternal, saving and transformational love that we proclaim and celebrate today.

Easter is above all else an occasion of celebration, joy and delight. But none of those words make sense unless they are grounded in ideas and realities like 'love' and 'communion', 'justice' and 'peace'. It is possible (we all know this) to celebrate selfishly; to have happy feelings unkindly, and to delight cruelly in the failings of others.

The apostle Paul saw and heard of plenty of this sort of Christian immaturity in the communities that he ministered to; and this is why he wrote to them saying that they should knock it off. As he says to the Corinthians, 'you say you are celebrating the Lord's Supper, but I hear that those who can afford it are simply over-eating and getting drunk. That might feel like joy to you, but it doesn't look like joy to me.' We need to be advised in similar ways today. To be challenged not to be content with

things that make a few of us happy for a while, but to seek true and lasting joy for all. Sustainable joy, one might say.

I think it was Jean Vanier who said that one of the tasks of the church today is to teach the world how to celebrate. He, like Henri Nouwen, learnt this lesson not from the privileged, healthy and successful, but by sharing his life with disadvantaged and profoundly needy people. It was here that both found true spiritual joy bubbling up irrepressibly.

The resurrection of Jesus is nothing if it is not irrepressible. And Easter joy is nothing if it is not sustainable.

We are not talking here about someone's theory of life. We are not talking about good news for the few. We are talking here about something earth-shattering and mind-blowing for all. A belief that, despite the way it seems when we look around us, love is stronger than death; love is stronger than hatred; and love is a far more profound force than malice. The core Christian belief is that evil, horrendous though its consequences can be, is actually defeated by the love of God that was revealed in Christ, from the first cries of the infant in the stable, to the dying words of the man on the cross. Those last few words were positively laden with both humanity and theology. Horror and death are embraced, but the eternal power of love presses on and shines out to the end. At the very end Jesus cries out: 'it is finished' 'completed', 'accomplished'. The achievement of the crucified Christ is to have lived on the receiving end of sin without succumbing to it; the triumph is in relentlessly replying to abuse with transformative love and hope.

This is the true triumph of Easter, and the true heart of the gospel. It's most properly and convincingly proclaimed in a way of life in which its love that does the talking, the doing and, above all else, the willing.

Christianity is, of course, a religion for people of all ages, because people of all ages can love. But it's also a religion of learning, growth and development.

Christian maturity involves the warm and passionate embrace of life in its fullness, diversity and glory; it involves a desire and a longing to reflect the loving purposes of God; it involves moral clarity, but it eschews judging others; it is constantly looking for moments of delight, but is only interested in the sort of joy that is sustainable because it is based in truth and community and generosity of spirit.

It is this maturity to which the resurrection of Christ calls us, and for which the life of worship and sacraments, praise and prayer, equips us. It is an open-ended maturity, lived out differently by each individual person.

This is perhaps why the stories of Easter Day are mysterious and strange, ambiguous and open. Good Friday is simple by comparison. It was an end. But if Good Friday was a full-stop, Easter Day is the next capital letter. It's the beginning of a word; the beginning of a sentence; the beginning of a story that it's up to you and God to write together.

I hope and pray that this Easter Day may be the beginning of the story of the rest of your life, and that that story and that life will be one of deep, delightful and sustainable joy. And that, whatever circumstances you find yourself in, you become aware of, and respond to, the irrepressible power of God: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

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Colossians 3.1-7; John 20.1-18*