

SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY 2020

Alleluia! Christ is risen! This is our acclamation for Easter morning every year, including in this year of Covid 19. Does it ring true at this difficult time? Well I think it does, and it reminds us of something very important about Easter that can get lost in the excitement.

The Resurrected Christ is not like Lazarus, or the widow of Zaraphaths' son (raised by Elijah), or Jairus' daughter (also raised by Jesus), or the young man revived by Paul (he had fallen out of the window, in Acts of the Apostles). Christ is different to all of them because he carries his wounds with him. At his Ascension, those wounds are taken into heaven with Jesus, in his risen body. Reminders of suffering and pain are not forgotten about, as if they had never existed.

There can be a tendency today, in increasing numbers of churches, where, if you show that you are in difficulties, this is interpreted as meaning you have sinned or 'failed' badly and are being punished by God. As if, *'we are Saved, so no matter what I am feeling it has to be good, and if it isn't good then something is wrong with me and it's my fault and I mustn't drag anybody else down with me into my sin'*: those can be the feelings for some? Church members might keep away from those who are displaying difficulties, or patronise them from a superior moral position with their pity and, yet also, hints of stern disapproval (as if they are being judged). I guess it's human nature where, if we believe that God has judged somebody as 'bad', then it's an open shot for us to also communicate our disapproval and feel superior? But, of course, that doesn't make it the right thing to do!

To listen to Christian conversations, sometimes, it's as if everyone has to feel marvellous and to be successful and happy because Jesus has risen. If you don't feel like that then that labels you as a bad person. Or a failing Christian. Not praying hard enough. Lacking faith.

Of course, we can certainly paint ourselves into a corner with negative thinking. Very often that is due to circumstances and what we need is a helping hand or a listening ear to encourage us to find ways to get out of the corner. It might look like counselling or spiritual direction or a good friend. Helping people out of the corner takes many shapes. Some people find themselves in a very difficult place in life, through no fault of their own, but rather the failings of systems or people whom they relied upon. It's marvellous if someone's faith is enough to carry them through those difficult places and sustain them. But what if it's not? Are they 'bad people' whose ills are their own fault?

Jesus' wounds kill him. We are not unaffected by the world because we have been 'Saved'. Jesus is affected by the world, just like we are, even though he is God. Covid 19 affects everyone, equally, the good and the sinners. So, it is wonderful and miraculous that Jesus 'Saves' us to eternal life, but it doesn't make us super-human now. We are still subject to the chances of the world, but now we are not without hope in our trials and tribulations. Because we are saved, we can face dangers with confidence, knowing that Jesus will not let us disappear into nothingness but that he will rescue us and we will be with him. We may die, but we will not be lost. One day, Jesus promises that he will return and all the dead will be raised to the same kind of resurrection life that Christ experiences and is the first of.

It seems to me that this Easter fits much more exactly to what the first Easter must have been like for the disciples. There was the euphoria, and we read about that in the road to Emmaus. But there is awe and terror when Jesus appears in the locked room, and also when he cooks breakfast on the beach. Both of those occasions seem to evolve into confusion and mystery. After Pentecost the disciples are out on the road again, establishing new churches around the Mediterranean and beyond. Jesus is not there to help them physically. They are saved, but they are continuously persecuted for proclaiming the Christ who died and rose to new life. Parts of 2 Corinthians, from Paul, certainly don't make us think that he was having an easy time of it and life was marvellous!

This Easter, maybe things feel a bit more like the end times that Jesus prophesies, when he foretells his return, and the terror and destruction that will accompany it. It is still Easter. Jesus has sacrificed himself for us. But life is full of doubt and uncertainty, as it must have been for Paul and the other apostles, as they spread the Good News around their known world. Easter was not diminished by their experiences and it isn't by our experiences. This is a very difficult time to live in. We feel vulnerable, confused and a bit lost perhaps? Surely, because we are 'Saved Christians', this shouldn't be happening to us? Well, I wouldn't be surprised if the original apostles thought exactly the same things. And yet they persisted through it all and the Christian church was established, and it spread.

Jesus says, "those who endure to the end will be saved". The resurrection never meant that life would be easy for Christians. But it did mean that there will be a known destination at its end. We journey from whatever situation we are in now, towards the heart of God. On our way, Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me." The death of Christ lives in us and so does the resurrection. Jesus' call was to discipleship, where we try to live as much like him as we can. Some people will have a very smooth and straightforward life, thanks be to God! For them, the Christian journey is, by and large, enjoyable. What helps us, in our challenging times to be able to endure to the end, is that we know beyond this life, the one who waits for us all, no matter what kind of journey we have had, is Jesus Christ.

We already meet Jesus, now, in the kindness of those fellow disciples who show us his love by their unconditional acceptance and support of us.

In the darkness of Easter Day Jesus' original disciples waited in despair and devastation, not knowing or believing that Jesus was risen. They just knew that his body had gone. But beyond that day there was unexpected and unimagined jubilation when they met Christ, risen from the dead. That fills us with Hope and Joy, especially this Easter. Alleluia!

Giles Kendall, 12.4.20