

START:STOP – Tuesday 21 April 2020

Reading – 1 Corinthians 15: 50-58

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection

As always, the poet Malcom Guite provides inspiration for reflection. Last week he lamented in Poetry Corner in The Church Times, inspired by TS Eliot, that April has indeed become the cruellest month. Even as life blossoms around us, death stalks our streets and hospitals. We must remember that it was into the cruellest April that Christ came to find and save us. But the cruellest April became the April of ultimate hope through the resurrection. Several commentators have noted that during the health crisis the church and its leaders, while celebrating Easter, have not really emphasised that it is from the resurrection that Christian hope, joy and inspiration flow ...as though the resurrection is a somewhat contentious, touchy subject that might put some listeners off. In the words of the theoretical physicist and priest John Polkinghorne, without the resurrection we would probably not have heard of Jesus.

We may all at times experience elements of doubt in aspects of our faith including in the resurrection – a sense perhaps that it is too wonderful to be true. Influences from the prevailing world view that the dead do not come back to life may press upon us. So I believe it is helpful to stand back and assess the evidence and to reflect on what the resurrection means for us and to be thrilled anew.

The resurrection of Jesus was completely unexpected, despite what Jesus had carefully explained to his frequently mystified disciples. There were differing views on resurrection among the different groups of the Jewish faith. Some expected resurrection of the Jewish people at the end of time, but none expected the resurrection of an individual before the end times.

The gospel accounts of those who experienced the risen Christ resound with fear, confusion, failure to recognise Jesus, the disciples’ resorting to locked rooms. There is no triumphant,

joyous alleluia packed reaction and slick interpretation that one might expect from fabricated or heavily edited or stylised accounts. Similarly, the first witnesses were women, whose testimony was not accepted as valid in the ancient world. Many commentators now consider these written accounts of the post resurrection appearances to be directly based on oral accounts of the eye witnesses of the resurrected Jesus struggling to describe totally unexpected encounters that defied words.

The variations in describing the resurrection across the four gospels enhance rather than detract from the authenticity of the accounts – as police officers observe – totally consistent witness accounts suggest collaboration and editing of accounts.

Once they have been convinced of the resurrection and have been commissioned by Jesus and empowered by his Spirit, the transformation and response of the disciples and brothers of Jesus are remarkable. Previously fragile in their faith, understanding and commitment, they resorted to denial, fleeing from and abandoning Jesus when the pressure was on. After the resurrection they become the deeply committed evangelisers of the earlier church, confident in their faith and prepared to risk all for their resurrected Saviour.

In chapter 15 of his first letter to the church in Corinth, St Paul carefully sets out his understanding of the nature of the resurrected body of Jesus - the first and crucial sign of the New Creation which is also our destiny, when the trumpet shall sound for us. As the theologian Tom Wright explains, the resurrected body of Jesus is a physical body existing in a new form of existence embodied with a transformed form of matter. He is different and not instantly recognisable, walls cannot contain him, but the witnesses of Jesus are convinced that it really is the Jesus they knew, followed and loved. He bears the scars of his crucifixion which he shows to Thomas – his resurrected body while different conforms to the patterns his earthly body had conformed to.

Apparently, 98% of the atoms in our bodies change every year, yet our appearances, blemishes and deficiencies are replicated in the new atoms. In the same way, John Polkinghorne suggests that such patterns for each of us are retained within the memory of God and applied in the New Creation when all that is good within us will be retained, and the less good will be purified out as we move through the stages of drawing closer to God in his New Creation. The God who makes all things new.

This is our hope that flows from the resurrection; this is the basis of our faith which we should delight in proclaiming. We are appointed to, create flashes of the life and flavours of perfected New Creation now as the eyes, hands and feet of Jesus – drawing alongside the suffering, the outcast, the struggling and also telling the world that God provides an ultimate perfect destiny - a realm when injustice, disease, exploitation, death are no more. The resurrection confirms this. We should not be nervous or reticent in shouting from the roof-tops or indeed through zoom and youtube.

Thine be the glory, risen conquering son,
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.

Prayers

God of compassion,
Who raised your Son to new life
have mercy upon this nation and our world,
in this time of fear and confusion:
we bring before you those who are suffering from the Coronavirus;
the aged and those who are most vulnerable
and for all who tend to their needs;
we pray for those who are now in isolation;
may know your comfort and company
and that those around them may truly love their neighbour
by prayer and in works of care and kindness;
we pray for health professionals, doctors, nurses and hospital support staff
as they answer their vocation under increasing pressure;
and we pray for those upon whose shoulders
the yoke of leadership rests,
that in their conversation and communication
your still small voice may be heard;
we ask this in the power of the Holy Spirit,
through the One who stretched out his hands to bless and to heal
even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

We pray for those close to us. For those in a particular need. At St Stephen Walbrook, we especially pray for Patrick, Anthony, Ian, Martin and Sam, Melvyn, Abbi, Brenda, Elizabeth. Father, bring healing, light and hope.

And we pray for ourselves: for the challenges and decisions we face. Walk with us; help us to be stewards of your new creation in all we do.

The blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you and all whom you love today and always.

Amen.