

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Easter Sunday – Radio 4 Broadcast

31st March 2013



*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord,
our strength and our Redeemer.*

I was up and out very early this morning too early to follow my usual routine for Easter Sunday. When I hear everyone stirring I put on a CD and play (at a moderate volume!) “Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Alleluia”, filling the house with the music of Easter.

One Easter morning I went early into the kitchen to find a small bird trapped on the inside of the window. The two cats were fortunately outside. I cupped her in my hands and took her into the garden where upon she spread her wings and disappeared. Releasing her into the wild felt like an Easter parable – like the body of Jesus, cornered by death in a tomb, now liberated into the open! His death and ours too, like a bird taking flight to find a nest and rest.

I love the Communion Service on Easter Day and that mystical sound when the choir sing the Sanctus, “Holy, Holy, Holy Heaven and earth are full of your glory”. In that moment as we worship God in the beauty of holiness we’re perfectly in tune with those in heaven singing His praises. Not just the angels but those who’ve gone before us and taken flight from the land of the dying into the world of the truly alive.

I find myself bowing in adoration, mindful of those I love who stand on that other shore. And, for a fleeting moment it makes me think of that day when I too by God’s grace will join them.

Dying is as natural as being born. It’s a like a second birth – both come with pain and tears. For all the wonders of modern medicine one of its downsides is the impression that dying is somehow a medical failure. As Pope John XXIII wrote *“Death, like birth, is only a transformation, another birth”*.

All of us would like to make a good death – with dignity and as free as possible from physical pain. And a good death depends upon three things the past, the present and the future.

When the end of your life is nearer than its beginning two things often surface – first there seems so little to show for the thousands of days; and secondly whatever good we’ve achieved seems dwarfed by the giants of our failures. But at Easter there’s a peace for our past through the words Christ spoke from the cross, “Father, forgive them”. Although uttered for the sake of those killing him, this prayer of Jesus covers, with amazing grace, every penitent sinner who’s ever found fault with themselves.

Entering the valley of the shadow of death anointed with that assurance can still the soul.

But a good death comes not only through being reconciled with our past but through being secure in the present. The Sanctus calls to mind the great crowd of worshippers in heaven that surround us invisibly. And on earth we’re surrounded physically by nurses and doctors, by family and friends. In the moment of our dying we trust ourselves to them. It’s a sacred bond of great intimacy. That’s why no law about assisted dying must ever violate the relationship of trust between the dying and those that surround us at that time.

We see such intimacy in the dying of Jesus as he binds together two of his dearest people – his mother Mary and his beloved friend John. To the dying soul there is great comfort in the goodness of the relationships that hold you.

And a good death also depends upon the future.

Have you ever wondered why the stone was rolled away from the tomb of Jesus? Surely it wasn't to let him out. He could move from room to room, through walls and closed doors. The stone was rolled away to let us in – to see that the tomb really was empty, to know that death is not the end of the story but a gateway to glory. The rolled away stone's an invitation to every disciple to follow Jesus into the tomb and deep into it and out into the light beyond. The rolled away stone shows that Jesus has flown from the grave and opened the gate of glory. It's that future which fills the follower with hope.

When our children were small we would often drive up to Scotland to visit my parents who lived on the shore of the Firth of Forth. It was a long journey but they would try to stay awake. In spite of the excitement their small bodies gave up on them, their eyes closed and they fell into a deep sleep. On arriving I would carry them over the threshold and put them into their beds. In the morning as the sun streamed through the window they would wake up to see the shore of the river, the birds swooping over the bay and their grandparents - oblivious to most of the journey they'd made in their sleep.

As we surrender ourselves to dying our exhausted bodies draw us into that deeper sleep. And out of that final slumber we awake to a vision of a different shore and to a world where dying, crying, grief and pain will all be things of the past. This is what Christians mean when in a funeral they commit their loved one to God "In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life".

When 19 years ago I became a bishop I was asked by a reporter whether or not I thought Christianity was relevant. I answered that it was relevant only to those who die. For all of us who want to make a good death the story of Easter comes with healing in its wings. It tells us that one day we who are cornered by death might like a bird spread our wings and take flight and find a nest and rest on another shore eternally