

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Easter Sunday Sermon
8 April 2012



It is nearly thirty years ago that Billy Graham came to this country to lead "Mission England". Football stadia around the nation were booked. Hundreds of thousands came to hear him preach.

As a curate in Bristol I was on a committee planning how we would advertise the Mission to the city. We came up with a slogan: *"God knows there's a better way"*. We then discovered that most of the budget was to be spent on putting this message on the side of all the buses in the city which would then be driving around: *"God knows there's a better way"*!

We settled instead for classic English understatement: *"Billy Graham – worth listening to"*.

As part of the preparation I went to a seminar in which Dr. Graham spoke about how he approached his preaching. He said he always bore in mind when preaching the Gospel that people were afraid of dying.

When I became a Bishop, now nearly 18 years ago, a journalist asked me if I thought Christianity was still relevant. I thought of Billy Graham's advice. *"Yes, if people are still afraid of dying."*

You may remember that two years ago I led a Lent course every Wednesday evening here in the Cathedral. I'm hoping to do another next year. Each evening we looked at a different subject in a series called *"The World through the eyes of Jesus"*. The evening that attracted the biggest attendance was on dying.

I thought it would be the evening we looked at the problem of suffering. No, it was *"the valley of the shadow of death"* that drew the greatest crowd.

It is no surprise to me, and certainly no cause for regret, that the Christian faith, the church, attracts more people as they get older. There are all sorts of jokes about people cramming for their finals. But, in truth, that's when people do become aware of the relevance of Christianity.

Our society's anxiety about dying is reflected in the increasing public debate about how we die. On all sides of the argument everyone wants to die with dignity and without pain. Those who want to bring in assisted dying want to put the patient in control of their destiny. Those, like me, who fear a change in the law believe that to do so would change fundamentally the patient's relationship with their doctor and their family and make the weak more vulnerable.

But the backdrop to this debate is an increasing uncertainty about what happens to us when we die. Many come to funerals of family and friends possessed of a wishful thinking that death is somehow not the end; few are possessed of what the prayer book calls that *"sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life"*.

A story I've been telling around the Diocese is about the day I took my uncle's funeral. As I was leading the service from the lectern a Red Admiral butterfly was circling over the heads of the congregation. Just as I was about to say the prayers it landed on my prayer book. I took this opportunity to explain that just as this butterfly had once been a caterpillar and had been transformed into a new body – the same creature but a new form, so we when we die are transformed into new spiritual bodies. We are the same creature but in a different form/body. It's what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 v44 *"It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body"*.

The day after the funeral my aunt rang, *"James, you'll never believe what happened today. It's never happened before. We were sitting with the doors open on the garden and in flew a Red Admiral butterfly. it circled the room over the sympathy cards and flew out again. Do you think that was a sign?"*

PAUSE

Did I? Do you?

I think the natural world is full of signs of the supernatural world, the physical of the metaphysical, the material of the spiritual.

Yet a greater sign than this that death is not the end of our creatureliness is the empty tomb and the Resurrection of the Son of Man.

In a previous sermon on another Easter Sunday I posed the question as to why the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. I pressed the point that Jesus in his resurrected body could move through doors and walls. He didn't need the stone rolled away. The disciples did. The stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out but to let them and us in. Why? To see that this same Jesus "crucified, dead and buried" was indeed risen from the dead. But there's another reason still.

Those who entered that empty tomb took their first steps in following Jesus through "the valley of the shadow of death" and from the land of the dying to the world of the truly alive. The tomb is the threshold, and can be entered with confidence because he, the Son of God, is alive and has opened the gate of glory for all who will follow.

"Bishop, is Christianity still relevant?"

Yes, to all who long with the poet John Donne that death should die.

The faith we celebrate today assures us we shall not sleep forever.

St. Paul followed Jesus and said *"I tell you a mystery. We will not all fall asleep forever. We'll be changed ... In the twinkling of an eye the trumpet will sound the dead will be raised.... and this mortal body must put on immortality (so) ... death where is your sting ...? But thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lords Jesus Christ!"* (1 Corinthians 15)

Is Christianity relevant to the 21st Century? I should say so. If the caterpillar can survive the tomb of the chrysalis to become a glorious butterfly should not the child of God be able, with God's help, to travel through the grave to life eternal?

So on this Easter Sunday do not fear to enter the empty tomb. Put your hand into the hand of our Risen Lord and follow him through life, through death and to life eternal.

Today do you cherish one who died and long to be re-united?

Put your hand into the hand of the Risen Lord and fear not to enter the empty tomb.

Today as you wonder about your own mortality and are afraid of dying?

Put your hand into the hand of the Risen Lord and fear not to enter the empty tomb.

Today as you feel drawn to and called by the Risen Lord?

Put your hand into the hand of the Risen Lord and fear not to enter the empty tomb.

And you will be raised with him to life eternal.