

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Easter Sunday Sermon

31st March 2013



Some years ago when I was a curate I did a late night TV series called "Final Word". Different guests were told *"here is a microphone. You've got one minute left to live. The whole world is listening to you. What would you say?"*

I feel like one of those guests here in this pulpit on my last Easter as Bishop of Liverpool! What should I say? I remember one of those guests was a racy novelist: She said in her breathless and enthusiastic manner "Oh, God! Thank you. I've had a most wonderful life. So thank you so much. But as you know I've done and said some terrible things that I shouldn't have done. So, Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy. And thank you". At least that was the gist of it!

But as a valediction to this life gratitude and confession are final words with a ring of truth. Yet there's an assumption to this farewell namely that there is a life beyond the grave, and a God to hear our final prayers. And this is an assumption, indeed a conviction that lies at the heart of this Easter Day service. It comes sharply into focus in our Communion Prayer when the choir sings the Sanctus "Heaven and Earth are full of your glory". This is when we become aware that as we worship God here on earth we are tuning into the worship of heaven where they live to adore him eternally. And in that singing I often think of those I love who are now on that other shore – freed from the cares of this life and at one with God. Perhaps you too might think of your loved ones then.

But is that just fanciful, wishful thinking, whistling in the dark of this world's sorrow? This service, our faith, is based on the earliest creed that "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures and that on the third day he rose from the dead according to the scriptures".

Some might wish to say that this Resurrection was just a spiritual or psychological experience. And some have said that even in the church. But, if you read the Gospels and take it at face value the resurrection of Jesus is historical, objective, physical, tangible and visible.

Historical not hysterical – there were eye witnesses to testify.
Objective not subjective – many people experienced him alive at the same time.
Physical not psychological – his body left the tomb well and truly empty.
Tangible not a phantom – those who saw him could touch him.
Visible not illusory – they saw him with their own eyes not just in their imaginations.

But in my last Easter Day sermon I'm not here to give you a lecture but to tell you why it matters to me (and to you) that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Have you ever loved someone and lost them to death and in your distress longed that you might see them again? Then ponder this. Who gave you that love? Who put that loving into your heart? Is it conceivable to you that the one who put that loving into your heart also put that longing into your soul to see them again? The source of our loving is according to the Bible also the source of our hoping. The one who gave you the capacity to love gave you also the capacity to hope. And just in case you are tempted to say that this is still wishful thinking God takes the loveliest person ever to have lived – Jesus – the one who has captured his own heart as well as ours and leads him through the valley of the shadow of death to come out of the tomb into the spatial dimensions of eternity.

These are gifts from God to the world – love and hope. And the more we love our loved ones the more we hope for that love to continue beyond the grave. This sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life firmly rests on the historical foundation of the journey Jesus made through the valley of the shadow of death and out of the tomb and it matters for three reasons.

Without the resurrection death and death are the end of the journey.
Without the resurrection pain and suffering have the final say on the journey of life.
Without the resurrection grief and mourning are the last words on human existence.

But

With the resurrection we can say that death is not the end to the journey.
With the resurrection pain does not have the final say on the journey of life.
With the resurrection grief is not the last word on human existence but rather the birth pangs of a new birth into eternity.

This is all beautifully captured in the second to last chapter of the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation “God himself will be with them, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away”. There’s our vision for the future. Dying, crying, grieving. All gone. Because of the Resurrection. All this promised to those who put their trust in and follow Jesus into the grave and out again.

I remember in my early 40’s three of the six most significant people of my childhood died within six weeks. The third was my father. An Army Officer who had worked his way up through the ranks he was a man of great integrity. But for him faith did not come easily. To be honest, sometimes I even felt it came between him and me probably on account of my insensitive enthusiasm. When he was dying all five children were called to his hospital bedside with my mother. In a moment alone together I held his hand and asked him if he would like me to pray. He squeezed my hand as together we turned in trust to the Risen Lord.

He will be in my heart and mind together with my mother and others I have loved when we hear the Sanctus in a moment. Who will be joining you in that moment when Heaven touches the Earth? Will it become for you a taste of Heaven on Earth as with the angels and the saints we sing?

“Holy, Holy, Holy heaven and earth are full of your glory”

The Resurrection happened because God in his infinite love and mercy wants you and me to fulfil the hope and to dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

So today will you open up to the goodness and mercy of God, will you let the Risen Lord take you by the hand, will you let him lead you from death to life, will you let goodness and mercy follow you so that you with those you love might live forever and dwell in the House of the Lord forever.