



12th April 2020 Easter Day

Easter Hope

Easter is a celebration of hope; surely a theme for us to both embrace and embody this spring for the message of the cross and empty tomb is that the darkness will never extinguish the light.

There are times, of course, when we fear that darkness is winning. St John of the Cross describes those moments as The Dark Night of The Soul and I suspect there have been times over recent weeks when we might have experienced that.

I've taken a vow in our house not to talk about the Pandemic after 10 at night when my anxieties seem magnified by the darkness.

And I suspect that's what it felt like for Jesus' disciples at the end of Good Friday because throughout history a crucifixion had normally been understood as a full stop.

In 1863 a French biography of Jesus ended with Good Friday and on the next page was written the word 'Finis' – the end. That's it – all over – a crucifixion – rabble rouser problem solved for the Romans and humiliating put down for yet another of Israel's false dawn Messiahs.

But that's not what the cross stands for in Christianity.

Instead we dare to believe that the cross speaks to us about

love, goodness and forgiveness.

And that through the cross – and in the reality which is proclaimed through the resurrection – darkness has not snuffed out the light which still shines at the centre of the universe – a God of light – A God of truth and a God of justice.

Jesus never proclaimed that living with such a belief would be easy. Indeed, just like every life his own had intense moments of confusion, anxiety, doubt and darkness. But at such times don't we also see in Jesus a faith that is sustained by prayer and a pilgrimage that is shared in community.

Today I believe that light is stronger than darkness.

And here's something else I want to affirm on this, the most important Festival of The Church: today of all days I believe in hope rather than despair.

The Resurrection brings hope. On the cross Jesus makes an astounding promise to the penitent thief – it's a promise that can profoundly mould our understanding of life and death: *'today you will be with me in paradise'*.

Christianity has this theme of hope written through its core. Hope filling life, today and tomorrow.

I've really missed going into London over recent weeks as we like nothing better than doing a Saturday walk there. One of our favourite spots is to walk over the Millennium crossing – the one that will for ever be remembered as the wobbly bridge – from Bankside to St Paul's. The first time I did that, as I came to the end of the bridge, I looked up and saw the great Phoenix

carving across the South door of the cathedral. Wren no doubt incorporated it to remind succeeding generations that this House of Prayer rose from the ashes of The Great Fire of London.

The Phoenix. It was a symbol adopted by the early church for Easter. The bird that dies and then rises again unconquered. This is the church's Phoenix Day – the Day of Resurrection when we proclaim that however hard going our personal struggles are, and however challenging it is to live in these days of the universal pandemic – we believe in hope rather than despair. It is the hope and light from a sunrise in the garden.

And finally, the thought that Easter is as much to do with today as it is with tomorrow.

The message of the resurrection changed the disciples there and then. It altered their perception and inspired their actions.

There is a great challenge before us all this Easter; that even at a time of such uncertainty and, for some, immense personal sadness, we are called to live the 'resurrection' today. To have faith and hope flavour our living, this day, at this time and in this context. And with the Holy Spirit's help we believe that is possible, that in this forthcoming Easter Season of 2020 we can be, indeed we are called to be, people of hope.

The resurrection helps define us – it makes a difference to the way we live, the attitudes we hold and the actions we perform.

So today we have gathered over the airways to sing our alleluias and to affirm again that light and hope are stronger than darkness and despair – and to affirm that not just as a

future longing, but as a present reality.

I want to end with a story I came across a few years back, one I've often told from a pulpit, and today I make no apology from speaking it into a microphone. It may not be the most theologically insightful story but to me it sums up so much of what I think this day is about.

It's said that a church office in North Carolina had an Easter display one year of a life-sized Jesus cradled in his mother's arms. He was shown just taken down, dead, from the cross. And that year an old southern lady popped her head round the church office door and said to the staff: Is that Jesus dead? – yes. Killed by the bad men? – yes. Dead and gone forever? – no. Lives again then? – yes. Surely, they said, you must have heard of the resurrection?

Heard it before? she said. I've heard it a million times – but I just love hearing it again!

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Alleluia!