

## EASTER DAY 2017 Yr A

### St David's Eucharist

'What would winning this competition mean to you?'

Well, the answer to this vacuous question, invariably addressed to competitors at some point in something like *Strictly Come Dancing* or *The Voice* or *X Factor* is usually, 'Oh it would mean the world to me.'

And indeed, when it happens and the winner is announced (usually after the obligatory extended pause) you can see the emotion written on their faces and the elation it brings.

Well, you can tell I'm only jealous because I've never won a competition.

But actually you don't have to have won a competition to know the experience. To want something to happen very much – the ideal job, just the right house, the partner who's the one – is likely to mean, if it does come about, that the moment you discover it has, will be memorable.

And such moments are usually life-changing in some kind of a way, such is their impact on us. And because the impact is emotional quite as much as anything else we will remember the detail of it, and will gladly retail it to other people as many times as we're asked.

The resurrection was like that to those who experienced it. And you catch that sense of amazement and even disbelief in all the gospel accounts of it. Matthew's, whose telling of it we've just heard is no exception. Was the earthquake real? Or is that Matthew trying to indicate what a ground-breaking event it is that he's describing? Is that in fact what the encounter with the living God feels like when he comes so close? We can never know, of course, but it certainly makes for a very dramatic picture indeed.

I love the idea of Matthew's angel coming and perching on the stone outside the tomb like some first century garden gnome! But Mark and Luke have messengers from heaven too – for this scene is not least about giving messages of good news to the ones who will henceforth be responsible for it.

And it is of course the best news: it is unprecedented news that changes the course of history. Just as for many of those contestants I mentioned at the beginning, this is an event that changes the course of lives. Nothing will ever be the same again. Something new is happening which will be utterly transformative. It's an event that points to a different – and better – future. The resurrection of Jesus is an event filled with hope.

Somehow, death has been overcome and the place of entombment has become the womb of new life. Jesus is alive never more to die. This is the new world, the kingdom of God breaking through into the darkness of pain, grief and loss. Human sin and injustice are overturned by the love of God. And the faith of Jesus which took him to the cross so that we might have hope for the future is vindicated.

Love, faith and hope; I have been suggesting these virtues lie at the heart of the events we've been thinking about over these last days. And as I said in my first address on Maundy Thursday these are the most crucial keys to human flourishing. Without them, I said, quoting a former Dean of Exeter, 'human life is unhappy, bored and aimless'.

On Maundy Thursday we watched as Jesus expresses a deep and personal love for each of his disciples – yes, even Judas because he has already forgiven him – by washing their feet and giving them a meal to remember him by. On Good Friday Jesus lives out that same love on the cross in an act of profound faith in his Father, trusting that in willingly handing himself over to bear the pain of loss, dereliction and death, his Father’s will would be accomplished.

And then, early in the morning on the first day of the week – no accident that – the new creation begins. In the mystery of the darkness of the tomb God’s unquenchable life bursts in and Jesus is raised from the dead. We’ve had two thousand years to get used to that idea – so much so that it almost seems ordinary and only to be expected – but you only have to read again the accounts of those who were witnesses to understand how mind-blowing it really is.

But it was and is real. It was and is a miracle, proved ultimately by the lives of those who have witnessed it. They were grief-stricken and broken men and women whose hopes had all been dashed. And then, in the early morning light they began to realise that death and pain and hatred and sorrow do not ultimately have the last word. Jesus had indeed overcome all of them in his death as he had in his life.

And of course it meant the world to them. It opened a new world, which at first they could hardly get their minds round, but it changed them. Their own lives would never be the same again. Finding themselves transformed and filled with new faith and love and hope they then, that small group of men and women in Jerusalem, began to tell others what they had experienced. And their joy was tangible and infectious.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin who spent a great deal of his ministry in India wrote this:

‘How can this strange story of God made man, of a crucified stranger, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world which can satisfactorily be explained and managed without the hypothesis of God? I know of only one clue to the answering of that question... a congregation which believes it.’

Martin Luther King put it simply like this: ‘Christians are a colony of heaven.’ By living as a faithful loving community we bring the hope of heaven and the reality of its presence into the place we are. The resurrection is both a present reality and a future hope.

It brings the hope that things can change. It assures us that we are indeed loved. 'Whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us', says St Paul. Or as Rowan Williams puts it, 'We don't have to persuade God to be good to us; he's already made that decision.' So as we gather here on this Easter morning we are already being shaped into that colony of heaven which can bring the hope of change and new life to a needy world. The meal that Jesus gave us to remember him by brings us together in communion with one another and with him.

This is how he shapes us as we remember, Sunday by Sunday, the wonder, the joy and the hope of that first Easter day, the beginning of a new creation, the vindication and victory of the power of love and faith in the world as we know it and the power of hope to help us live as faithful, loving people and to assure us that ultimately all shall be well.

As the camera in the helicopter panned over the cortege of PC Keith Palmer coming out of Westminster Abbey the commentator remarked that his body had lain in a building that had been, in his words, 'a beacon of hope' for centuries. He spoke, perhaps, truer than he knew and more than he realised. For that is the Church's calling; that is our calling.