

THE ADDRESS

An address for St David and St Michael, Exeter, Easter Sunday 2020 by Nigel Guthrie.

What a strange world we are living in! People are living in virtual isolation in many countries. This can be very hard especially when people are living alone, or in cramped accommodation or with someone they cannot trust to treat them well. Church buildings, pubs and many businesses are closed. As a nation we are racking up unimaginable debts, debts which will take years to pay off. It is impossible to visit our family members living in residential care. Hospitals are filling up with people suffering from a disease of which we were hardly aware a few months ago. Many are dying, and those who do die are only allowed small scale funerals. Sometimes their loved ones have not been able to see them before they died.

We are living through an extraordinary and a painful time.

And yet good things are happening. Hospitals and care workers are managing heroically and on Thursday evenings we are coming out of our houses to applaud them and others who are putting their lives on the line. We are going out of our way to contact family, friends and neighbours to check that they are OK. Neighbourhoods are getting together to help those who are unable to leave their homes. And here in the middle of Exeter the air is clear and the birdsong is almost deafening first thing in the morning. There are no planes above the city and hardly any cars on its roads. Levels of pollution are dropping rapidly around the world. For Christians there is an opportunity to deepen our prayer and engagement in scripture. And the clergy (even the older ones) are learning how to live stream services – for better or worse! Even the St Michael's peregrine has laid an egg in time for Easter.

Perhaps we are living through a time which will transform our societies and lead to better ways of relating to each other and to the world?

Most of us are certainly looking forward to an end to lockdown. I wonder if that will feel like a resurrection? I have a feeling it will be quite a shock for many of us when it does come.

Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus against this extraordinary backdrop is very odd for those of who are usually in church. We have had no Holy Week services and we cannot gather in church today. Yet we can share in faith, and in prayer and in care for each other. And we can be witnesses to the resurrection, which is what both of our scripture readings encourage us to be.

I wonder if you noticed which phrase cropped up twice in our gospel reading? It is a phrase which is said to occur 365 times in the bible. It is the phrase 'Do not be afraid'. In our gospel reading the words are spoken firstly by the angel who rolled back the stone from the tomb. Then when Jesus appeared to them he said 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me'.

The disciples were afraid. In spite of what Jesus had previously told them they were in a state of shock and mourning. There is genuinely much for us to fear at the moment both in the short term from the virus and in the longer term from the economic and social effects of the lockdown. But we know that fear is only productive if it leads us to act wisely and to avoid unnecessary danger. If it paralyses us and stops us from living fully then we need to break away from it and fix our minds on hope. In the first letter of St John's he writes:

'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.'

What we see on the cross is perfect love; God's love poured out for us as Jesus suffered and died. It was love without limit. When we truly grasp the meaning of that sacrificial love we cannot be bound by fear because we know that we are forgiven and set free. And God's love was shown again on the first Easter morning when Jesus was brought to new life by the power of God. This power is quite beyond our imagination. It is not surprising that the soldiers and the women felt fear. Who

would not be afraid in the face of such overwhelming power – power over life and death?

And that is why Easter is still being celebrated all over the world and even in such strange conditions. Because those who know the power of God for themselves are certain that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love that was poured out on the cross and joyfully vindicated in the resurrection. Even death can hold no fear because we know we are held within the loving purposes of God for all time and into eternity.

In her recent address our gracious Queen spoke of her confident hope that we will be together again. I wonder what your hope is: hope for a world in which people will care more for their neighbours and remember what is most important in life? Hope for a world where we value those who do the hardest jobs and give the most costly service? Hope for a world in which resources are more wisely used and more equitably shared?

May this Easter celebration strengthen you in hope and love; both in the knowledge of the love God has for you, and the love which you are able to share with those around you as witnesses of Jesus Christ our risen Lord.