

## Address by Nigel Guthrie for Easter Day, 17 April 2022

This weekend there will be many Easter eggs given and many cards with chicks and bunny rabbits shared. And, in a good way, these are symbols of spring and new life which link with our celebration of the resurrection. But they also fall short of expressing the depth of the meaning of the resurrection. And that's because they don't require death to have happened before new life emerges. Chicks and bunnies along with blossom and new leaves certainly reflect the amazing ability of God's creation to renew itself, and they illustrate the endless creative power which we believe comes from God. And in fairness to the chicks and bunnies even St Paul's illustration of the resurrection falls short. He describes a seed which falls to the ground and dies before it grows again (1 Corinthians 15: 36). But we know that a seed isn't exactly dead. Forgive me if the science is wrong but I would say that a seed is dormant rather than dead.

By contrast the gospels are clear that after his crucifixion Jesus was well and truly dead. In fact the gospel writers go out of their way to underline it, just to deny the possibility that Jesus might have passed out and then revived in the cool of the tomb. St Mark tells us that Pilate actually checked with the centurion that Jesus had been dead for some time, before releasing his body for burial. And St John tells us that Jesus was so obviously dead that the soldiers didn't have to break his legs as they usually did to make sure the victims of crucifixion did not survive.

And our worship in Holy Week underlines the need for us to come to terms with death, before celebrating resurrection. It can seem a bit odd that on Palm Sunday we read the whole passion narrative of Jesus' suffering and death. Those who designed the liturgy perhaps realise that only a minority of people will usually attend worship on Good Friday and that the main gathered Sunday congregation needs to hear the full story to its bitter end.

As we get older the inescapable reality of death becomes clearer and more painful to us as we lose dear family members and friends. We can't escape death and I do find the modern phrase 'he or she has passed' quite unhelpful, as if we can't bear to mention the 'd' word. But in any sort of mature Christian understanding we need to look death square in the face and in doing so appreciate what the resurrection of Jesus means for us. And what resurrection means is the final power of God over life and death, and the absolute desire of God to bring us to new life after we have died.

Resurrection signifies the passionate love of God for us which transcends even what we know as human love, amazing and wonderful though that can be.

And looking at the world we realise that resurrection cannot happen without death. Think of the environmental crisis we're facing. Without dying to our addiction to fossil fuels and to an ever-growing rate of consumption there is little hope of resurrection for our battered eco-system. Facing up to this death is going to be very challenging indeed, not least because, in political terms, it still doesn't win enough votes.

And in the political sphere too, there needs to be a death to the desire to build empires and dominate others, if peace and prosperity are to grow and flourish. And I'm not just talking about Putin and the present catastrophe in Ukraine. A serious repentance for the evils of our own imperial past is only just seriously underway. I'm not saying it was all bad. Indeed there were many British people who went out with very good intentions. But our past does need to be reassessed and understood differently if we are to find a positive and realistic place in the modern world.

Many dreadful stories have emerged from Ukraine during these past two months and we can see that the suffering, hardship and grief caused by this war of aggression is going to endure for many years to come. So, what does it mean for us to celebrate Easter against such a grim backdrop?

Among the terrible stories of suffering and inhumanity from Ukraine there was a beautiful, heartrending and yet hopeful story that emerged this week. Perhaps it came to your attention, too?

It concerns Sasha Makoviy from Kyiv who was packing her belongings with the sound of bombs falling around her, unsure whether to flee because of the intense danger the situation. Sasha wrote the details of her two-year-old daughter, Vira, on the back of the little girl in case she survived but the rest of her family were killed. She knew that Vira was too young to understand what was happening or even to remember her mother and family in future years. So she wrote the little girl's name and date of birth on her back with a mobile phone number and took a photo, posting it on Instagram in the hope that, if anything happened to them, Vira would be able to find out about her parents and family through social media accounts.

Sasha and Vira did flee Kyiv and took a long escape route through Moldova, Romania and Belgium finishing in France where they now feel “surrounded by love and care”. Sasha was interviewed by the BBC and admitted that she is mentally crushed. But she also said ‘Vira is fine. She can feel something from me, but she is too small to understand. I’m really happy about her age. Really happy.’ Perhaps this can be a story of resurrection for us out of all the horror? The love and care of French people bringing new life and hope to this battered family after the terror of war and displacement.

Easter is the most powerful sign we can have that we are surrounded by God’s love and care. And it is this love that will bring us to resurrection. Therefore we can live with hope, alongside the pain and the despair we sometimes feel, because Alleluia, Christ is risen...