

Sermon for Easter Day  
at St Francis High Heaton

1<sup>st</sup> April 2018



Acts 10:34-43  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
John 20:1-18

If you go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which marks the site both of Golgotha and the Resurrection, you will find a place of chaos. It is home to the Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, the Syrians, the Ethiopians and the Armenians, the ancient peoples of the Christian family and they each control different parts of the building and jealously guard their negotiated moments to use the shared spaces. A constant stream of pilgrims push and shove their way round the Byzantine structure, much of it under scaffolding and restoration. Occasionally detachments of Israeli police or army pass through, guns casually slung over their shoulders or in their belts, and access is managed by the Nusseibeh clan, a Muslim family whose guardianship ensures no single Christian group gains hegemony over the others! It is a place where the conflict and strife of the human race seems writ large. Meanwhile, outside the 16<sup>th</sup> century city wall, just off Nablus Street there is another site of the Resurrection called the Garden Tomb. This was identified by General Gordon (of Khartoum) who looked out of his window one day and thought he could see the likeness of a skull in the sandstone cliff which stands now behind the Arab bus station near the Damascus Gate. In that cliff he found a first century tomb cut into the rock and so a garden was planted around it that is managed to this day by Evangelical Christians as an alternative location. The garden is well manicured, beautifully kept, shady and tasteful... there's even a gift shop with biblical recipe books and jars of honey. As with any site in the Holy Land, you make your decision about what's important, but for me the chaotic discord of the ancient site rings more true than the ordered serenity of a Victorian imagination.

The spiritual challenge is whether our faith is shaped round our own wish fulfilment, or whether it embraces the difficult things of

life and thus offers us a way *through* those difficult things because we strive with them rather than ignore or underplay them.

The Easter event is the surely the ultimate April Fool, an unbelievable trick that must have been made up. A dead man, come back to life? You must be joking!

Mary wanted to touch him, but Jesus said *Don't cling to me*. You can't grip on to God; you can't make the risen Christ an object of your desires.

"God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived", in other words if we could conceive of God, it wouldn't be God, so Christianity is a scaffold for the existence of something beyond our imagining. The challenge is how we mediate the metaphysical in a world of literal physicality - that's why jokes can be helpful..... when the strangers told Abraham his aged wife Sarah would have a baby she laughed!

The central tenet of our faith is the resurrection, which is unbelievable. So where does it take us? It takes us on the journey of faith, which includes:

Mystery..... I can't know everything

Possibility.... Everything can change

Community.... I don't have to be alone

Accepting each of these requires an act of consent, a yielding of the spirit.... and if I understand the passion of Christ correctly, this is precisely what we are offering to the world. When we give of ourselves, other things come to life, and that is *proper* life, life as it *should* be, the pattern of living Jesus showed us when he washed the feet of the disciples, what Jon described as *Divine* love in his sermon on Maundy Thursday. The fullest expression of that divine love was the crucifixion, an act of courage and humility way beyond what most of us could manage.... although the example of Arnaud Beltrame this last week in a French supermarket has shown us that human beings are capable of it.... that willingness to give of oneself is an inspiration and a source of hope. In placing himself on the cross in human form God has demonstrated that he shares our predicament, and in so doing transforms it.... that's why it was *Good* Friday, this ultimate act of compassion demonstrates that all our small acts, or not-so-small acts, of compassion are significant, they are part of something which provides HOPE for the world, and so we the church are called to be a community of compassion, the hope bringers, the Easter people.... demonstrating that life can change, death is not the end of the story, things can be made new, and our embrace of the mystery, our sharing in community and belief in possibility will get us there.

I suppose the church is a cultural manifestation of a way of thinking and feeling, in other words of a way of believing, and like any cultural manifestation it is easy to get stuck on the outward signs and neglect the inner truths...

And perhaps in this generation we have too many distractions....not so much social media (although the internet is having massive social change, like printing six hundred years ago....) But the distractions of our generation are money, the myth of the individual, and fatalism, the belief that nothing can be changed.

In a recent poll 70 per cent of 18-29 year olds stated that they had no religion. A young person I spoke to recently, quite without any hint of rancour said "I don't need God" in as matter of fact a way as a child might say of the stabilizers on her toddler pushbike. I guess for her that is perhaps what God represented.

I have a lot of respect for this position.... Why should I believe in something or someone whose existence is perhaps only the sum total of generations of wish fulfilment? Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy ends with the dissipation of The Authority, the figure of God trapped in a wizened cage protected by malevolent powers who use his existence to manipulate and manage the lives of people in countless parallel universes...and the establishment of what he calls the *republic* of heaven, which sounds very democratic and non-hierarchical compared with a *kingdom* of heaven.

I presided at a funeral recently of a woman full of years, a person of quiet faith, not practising, but whose faith had been severely dented by the death of her son, and why not... Christian

spirituality is littered with talk of prayer and healing, so what's the point if people die anyway? This is bleak stuff, but I don't know what kind of conversations we are able to have with our non believing children and grandchildren, or if we're lucky enough to be 16-25, with our non-believing peers, but it's not just the young; wherever I go I pick up at best polite curiosity, sometimes curious indifference, and more often sheer incomprehension! But I am still left with the thought that you cannot make love in a test tube, and yet you know it is real, so if you are prepared to believe in love, and if we say God is love, then *there is a lot more to believe in than we suppose.....* Our Christian faith is our way of expressing this belief, and the world needs it as much as ever.

A teacher found a little girl drawing and asked her what she was drawing and she said "I'm drawing God", and the teacher said "you can't do that, no-one knows what God looks like", to which the child retorted "they will just as soon as I've finished this picture!"

Faith requires a constant openness, a willingness to hear... even in old age, just as Abraham, Zechariah, Sarah and Elizabeth became the agents of God's salvation, and we can be too. This is why Christian faith cannot be separated from the longing for peace, for justice or for the integrity of creation, for these things signify life as it should be, which is what I understand to be the resurrection life we proclaim today. To achieve this requires what Luigi Gioia calls a *posture of prayer*: a yielding spirit, a spirit

of self-offering, a spirit of compassion and engagement with the world's difficulties, not a life seeking protection or escape. We will only plumb this mystery if through our life together we will demonstrate that anything, everything, can change - and that is no joke!

