

Sermon preached 28th April 2019 at 10 am by Revd. Peter Judd

We have followed the story through Holy Week and Easter, the familiar drama and readings. But every year is different because of the background and this year Holy Week was marked by the burning of Notre Dame in Paris – a thirteenth century forest of trees, just like the ones at Ely and Salisbury, that held up the roof burned away in a couple of hours. In days, billions of euros were pledged for its restoration, prompting the yellow vest protesters to say: “They care about the building but what about us?” And climate change activists, Extinction Rebellion, saying that if their priorities were right they would respond to the climate crisis with similar speed.

Then, of course, Easter day was shattered by the bomb attacks in Sri Lanka – the death toll as I write is around 300. Terrorist attacks are usually against the innocent and the vulnerable – and it emphasises the point I was making on Good Friday – that God’s power is not to be found in power but in the power of love which is itself vulnerable and fragile. And yet the only good things that will come out of the bombings on Easter Day will have been and will be those acts of kindness surrounding the injured and the bereaved. Those acts of kindness will not be a forgetting of the horror and the pain but they will be a help with the seeds of healing in them.

As I said, every Easter is different because of its context but the story remains the same. In today’s Gospel, we have the story of Thomas who wasn’t convinced by the other disciples – he wanted evidence – and countless sermons have been preached about Thomas’s failure and the blessedness of those who believe without seeing. But in reality, Thomas needed a bit of help – don’t we all? – and, in a small act of kindness, Jesus gave Thomas what he needed: “Touch me.” And that is what Jesus was all about. What is God like? To see God at work, embodied in a human being, living and working and loving and dying like us, is, at its simplest, an act of kindness, like a parent showing a child how to walk.

Now you can see my theme developing, that it is in small acts of kindness that love makes itself known and felt.

But, going back to Easter and the Resurrection. Our gospel tells us that the disciples were behind locked doors, fearful, and no doubt shattered. For a few brief years, they had been caught up in something exciting,

wonderfully hopeful, miraculous, as they followed this funny, poetic, clear-eyed prophet who completely inspired them but whose life was extinguished in disgusting torture and all hope with it.

Then some small things happened. There were rumours – he had been seen, the women told the disciples but they called them “idle tales” and believed not. And they didn’t believe Mary Magdalene when she told them about her encounter with Jesus in the garden.

But in today’s gospel, he stands among them, and the disciples rejoice, including, in the end, Thomas.

Leaving that room there, let’s take an overview. From the point of view of the Romans, the death of Jesus was completely irrelevant. Yes, Pilate was aware that Jesus was different from the thugs, fanatics and vicious terrorists that he was usually dealing with, but Jesus had become a nuisance and, given the affairs of state, there is only a certain amount of time you can give to slightly deranged prophets and mad men. That was that and Pilate had lunch. And it’s true, Jesus’ suffering and death was one of millions of deaths and 300 added this week. What difference can this make if you don’t understand the power of suffering love?

Again, look at those Resurrection appearances. Jesus appears to individuals and a few groups of people. Often he isn’t recognised or the stories of these encounters are dismissed as “idle tales”. Peter goes back to work and gets out his fishing boat and tackle. The encounters seem fleeting, ephemeral with Thomas wanting something tangible and yet these people, lost in bereavement, didn’t turn into depressed cynics without hope but into activists dynamic with hope and with a Gospel, who had grasped the reality of the power of love spreading invisibly through small acts of kindnesses, small and vulnerable but tenacious and able to grow, even to the point of bringing down great empires.

That is the clue to how those small beginnings – we are here centuries later – how in the world today 2.2 billion people call themselves Christians, how the flame still burns, the memory still shared at a meal with bread and wine (again small things.) Bishop John Austin Baker wrote about this memory in bread and wine: “Let us honour it, let the cathedrals soar, let art and music wait upon it and feel themselves privileged.” But he added, if we truly honour this memory and the Gospel it brings then we will not neglect the poor and hungry, the sick and the despairing but honour them too.

Let the cathedrals soar. Notre Dame was one of the pioneering buildings using radical engineering and the use of flying buttresses to slim down the skeleton of the building so that its walls were reduced, enabling huge windows, luckily coinciding with the coming of age of the stained glass artists who were able to make the most vivid yellows and reds and greens and blues so that whoever you are, believer or atheist, to be confronted by a dazzling, illuminated, soaring display of colours stops you in your tracks and lifts the spirits and always will. We need beauty in our often ugly world. The crucifixion teaches us, as Stoddart Kennedy from his experience in the trenches in the world war: “The true God is naked, bloody, wounded and crowned with thorns, tortured but triumphant in his love. We are learning to worship patient, suffering love and the muddy, bloody hero of the trenches is showing us who is the real King and how he has no need of crowns and baubles which are not worthy when compared to the quiet glory of this love.”

And the Resurrection appearances teach us that small things matter. Mary Magdalene – I have seen the Lord or Jesus’ kindness to Thomas still resonate and they teach us more.

My mother used to tell me that for my first seven years I was a happy, funny, sensitive, very affectionate little boy. I was sent off to boarding school, and returned at the end of my first term, silent, sullen, withdrawn. Had I been a dog, they would have taken me straight to the vet – what has happened to this dog? As it was I think they just thought it was part of the process through which the boy becomes the man. If they’d had more nous and experience, they’d have seen it for what it was – abuse. There were no acts of kindness there.

God works to redeem our pains and our failures and as often as not it’s through small acts of kindness and I intend in what years are left to me to try and rediscover something of that sensitive, affectionate, kind person – unless you become like a child – it’s a good agenda for all of us who are retired. But more, we’ve learned through this earlier story that terrorism will be defeated by small acts of kindness and vulnerable love, that after Sri Lanka lives will be rebuilt by redeeming small acts of kindness. And in passing – Extinction Rebellion – the task before us seems daunting, no gas cookers, no gas boilers, no petrol cars, but we know that small changes can make a difference and millions of small changes will make an impact.

Judith gave me a quote to end on from Middlemarch by George Eliot about the heroine, Dorothea. “The effect of her being on those around her was incalculable – for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who have lived faithfully a hidden life.”