

Sunday 28 April, 2019

A sermon preached by the Dean, The Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the Solemn Choral Evensong remembering the victims of the Easter Day terror attacks in Sri Lanka, on the Second Sunday of Easter, 2019.

Readings: Revelation 1.9-20, John 20.19-31

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

Last Sunday, as the Western Churches were celebrating the resurrection from the dead of the Lord Jesus Christ, more than 250 people were killed in coordinated attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka. As the church proclaimed that Christ was risen from the dead, hundreds were sent into their deaths, regardless of racial background or faith. Although most victims were Christians, there were Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, as well as people of no faith at all, among those dead or wounded. The ripples of this tidal wave of hatred planted on the day of resurrection have reached far beyond the shores of Sri Lanka. In our own city, in this Cathedral, there are many who know folks affected by the acts of terror of last Sunday. We live in an interconnected and interdependent world, where communities of faith, shared background and heritage reach across the globe. And so we grieve with the people of Sri Lanka, and share together in our sorrow at the senseless killing of so many.

For Christians this week is resurrection week. In the past weeks, we have faithfully followed the way of Jesus to the cross, stood weeping under the cross as Jesus died, and met early on the morning of Easter Day to give thanks that death has been defeated for good. And now we weep again, because even though the eternal nature of death has been overcome by the resurrection of our Lord, each individual death is still hard to bear, because profound ties of love have been ruptured as each life is taken. We know in our *minds* that 'death has lost its sting', but in our *hearts* we still feel the sting of sadness and grief that 'in the midst of life we continue to be in death'. At every death we feel a keen sense of loss, but we do so especially when lives are cut short, our loved ones die unexpectedly, die unprepared. And when the lives of hundreds of people are taken by cowardly acts of hatred, our grief may well mingle with anger at this grave act of inhumanity.

Tonight's Bible readings speak into this cocktail of emotions – the grief, the sorrow, the disbelief and anger we may feel. They encourage us that God is close to his people, even and especially in the midst of great disasters. They remind us that God *truly has* conquered death, and they charge us to place those we mourn and miss in his eternal care. They tell us that God's desire for his world is to be at peace, and that

he calls on each one of us to share with him in becoming peace-makers. And they tell us that God is giving us precious gifts for this mission: that he has gifted us the presence of his Holy Spirit to enable us to share his gift of forgiveness with others. Especially at times when our hearts are breaking in grief and we do not comprehend the hatred of humanity, our readings invite us to believe firmly in God's vision of peace and tell us actively to pursue it. And even though at the moment we may only see destruction and disaster, tonight's readings tell us that those who have not seen and yet believe are indeed blessed. And they call each one of us, by our believing, to become a blessing to others who also long for certainty and assurance.

Our first lesson was written at a time when the Christian church was persecuted on an unimaginable scale. Where today *terrorist* cells attack Christian places of worship and congregations, at the time St John the Divine wrote to the churches of the near East, those attacks were state-sponsored, coordinated directly by the pagan rulers of the Roman world. John writes from exile in Patmos, a small Mediterranean Island, to communities under threat, and tells them that he shares with them, and with Jesus, 'in the persecution, and kingdom and patient endurance'. He tells the churches that Jesus himself suffers when his people suffer: after all, Christians are all members of Christ's body. In the midst of the suffering that John witnessed in his own generation, he was granted a tremendous vision of the end of all time. His revelation both included visions of great disaster and destruction, as it did a grand vision of the ultimate rule of God, and the restoration of all things in Christ. In tonight's reading, John receives a vision that will frame his understanding of the destruction and devastation he will witness later in his prophecy: he sees the risen Lord Jesus, illumined by the sun, dressed in priestly robes and with a sword that divides good from evil, that separates death from life.

We are told that, at this vision, John 'fell at his feet as though dead', and that Jesus blessed his messenger, and assured him: 'I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see I am alive forever and ever'. Not only has Jesus experienced *our* deaths in his *own* body, but by dying, he has gained the 'keys of death and Hades', has taken hold of life forever. Opened the place of death to the transformative power of his eternal life. Those who die from now onwards, John's vision tells us, will not be locked up for eternity in a place of forgetfulness and death – Hades. Rather, they will be raised to life forever in the place where there will be no more persecution and tears. The place where God himself tends to his people with loving care, wiping away their tears from their eyes: the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, revealed to John at the end of his vision.

Here at this first encounter with the Living One, John is shown how God fully shares in our experience – not only in our deaths, but also in our day to day suffering. In his hands Jesus holds seven stars – the symbols of the church universal. Jesus the risen One holds his church in his hands, in times of hurt and in times of joy. And even in

the physical darkness of one of the greatest persecutions the church has ever known, the Roman destruction of so many faith communities, the churches shine brightly in Jesus' presence, as bright as the lampstands that surround the living God. Even when we only see darkness, the lampstands of our church communities stand shining brightly near God's throne, our lesson tells. And when we hurt and grieve, we are held in the nail-pierced hands of the living One, who has shared that same grief, and feels it just as keenly. And Jesus encourages *us*, like he did his prophet John, 'Do not be afraid!', when we come to experience the darkness and grief of persecution and terror.

Our second lesson, from the Holy Gospel according to St John, shows us that it is when we believe in the gift of Christ's peace, and we share that peace with others, we may overcome fear and terror. We are not to be afraid, because we have been gifted a peace that is beyond understanding: and this peace is a gift to be shared with the entire world. Jesus comes again into a place a fear. He passes through the locked doors of the room in which his followers had taken shelter, fearing violent reprisals following the death of their master on a cross. He comes right into their midst and, as a sign that it truly *is* he, he shows them the wounds left by death that mark his risen body in perpetuity. Proof of his real death, and his real rising. He greets them with the words, 'peace be with you'. Three times in our reading, Jesus gifts his friends and followers his peace. The peace from the fear of persecution, that will embolden them to leave behind the locked doors of their shelter; the peace that comes from forgiving the sins of others; and the peace that comes from believing without first having seen. 'Peace be with you', he tells them three times, and us through them. He tells that they and we might share that peace, that life, by our acts of faith.

It is the apostle to India and Sri Lanka, Thomas, who voices our all-to-human doubts. How *can* Jesus be alive and give life in a world of so much death? How can Jesus gift peace in a world of so much suffering? How can Jesus gift forgiveness in a world of so much hatred? 'I will not believe', Thomas said when the disciples shared their joy of the risen Lord with him, 'unless I see and feel'. And so, the following week, Jesus commanded Thomas to place his hands in his wounds, and place his trust in him.

Thirty years later, Thomas would feel the full weight of the wounds of the risen Jesus himself, as he gave his own life in Christ's service, when he was martyred on St Thomas' Mount in Tamil Nadu. At end of his own life Thomas feels and sees death, but in his own sacrifice he is strengthened by having first placed his trust in the Lord of life. Touching and seeing the wounds that marred God's own Son, so that we may carry the wounds of living lives of faith; wounds that speak of the gift and vision of peace in world that still longs for the peace that Christ gifts us, and all those 'whom God favours'. That peace, Thomas learnt, came from bold, sacrificial living; from

leaving behind the shelter of the upper room, and carrying the good news of life restored and sins forgiven by Christ to India and Sri Lanka.

Like Thomas, we are called to share both the assurance of the truth of the resurrection, and the promise of Christ's gift of peace to all. And, like Thomas, we may come to share in seeing and feeling the pain of the suffering of God's people: may share in the death of martyrdom ourselves, or in the grief of knowing those who have been martyred as witnesses of the resurrection, like those killed at worship in Sri Lanka last week. But just as important as the promise that we too may share, and feel, life that is forever, and the pain of suffering that comes with it is Christ's commandment that we are to be peace makers, peace bringers.

That it is by sharing actions and words of peace, and by forgiving the sins of those who sin against us, that the vision of the kingdom where God reigns among his people in peace, will be brought about. 'Receive the Holy Spirit', the risen Lord tells his friends. Receive the Spirit of counsel and comfort. And use this gift to forgive, to build peace, to share life. Use this gift to have boldness in making for peace and in comforting the grieving.

Friends, the same precious gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us, the followers of the Prince of Peace, today. *With* that gift come the experience of seeing and feeling grief and death, sadness and suffering, persecution and hatred, that is true. But *out of* that gift, we are assured, we may draw strength to forgive and shape a world that is more peaceful, more loving, more Christ-like.

'Peace be with you', Christ tells Thomas, and commands him to be a peace-bearer. From Thomas' sacrificial living and sharing the resurrection message, the faith of the church in Sri Lanka has been profoundly shaped. Just as our own sacrificial living and sharing the message of the gifts of forgiveness and peace *will* shape the faith of persecuted believers the world over. Thomas did *not* see the spread of the church in India and Sri Lanka. In the same way we may not see the fruits of Christ's forgiveness and peace in our own age. But Jesus' charge to Thomas holds as true for us today, as it did on that first Sunday after the resurrection: 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'. Blessed are those who out of their faith work for peace, through the gifts of forgiveness and love.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.