

# Midweek Sermon April 22<sup>nd</sup> – There is HOPE!

Today I want to talk about hope, which frankly we all very much need right now. Our reading is from the fabulous 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the church in Corinth.....

*What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

*So Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup> Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

*<sup>51</sup> Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – <sup>52</sup> in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'*

*<sup>55</sup> 'Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?'*

*<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

If you had been with the bedraggled remnants of the Jesus movement on Easter Saturday, you'd have found precious little hope! For the disciples and friends of Jesus, the world as they knew it had just come to an end. All their hopes had been invested in Jesus of Nazareth - their hopes for their nation, for their own lives, and for the future. And in less than 24 cruel hours from Thursday night into Friday afternoon, those hopes had been trampled into the dust.

A corrupt, self-serving, lying, power-hungry elite had engineered the crucifixion of the healer. Evil had triumphed. And those disciples were weighed down with a devastating mix of personal grief, utter shock and total disillusion. There was nothing to say, nowhere to go. They were utterly numb.

Indeed, even when we meet them again on Easter Sunday, they are *still* without hope. A group of women head for Jesus's tomb with no greater ambition than to show their final respects and seek some sort of closure. Cleopas and his friend have given up and they're heading home to rebuild what they can of their shattered lives. The 11 disciples are self-isolating, in a lockdown that's born of the terrible fear that those who had killed Jesus might now be coming for them. They're together, but at the same time horribly alone and fearful.

Right now, I'm guessing there are a lot of folks who could empathise with that. Last year, we had the Brexit fiasco in parliament, and we thought that was bad enough! But of course wall to wall Coronavirus headlines are far worse. There was a cartoon in one of the papers – one old man saying to another, *"My goodness, don't you miss Brexit?"*! It was Terry who reminded us a few weeks ago, that back in the day, Corona was that nice man bringing fizzy drinks round in his lorry. Well, Corona today is very different! It's definitely lost its fizz!

Today, Corona is people who've lost their jobs; people who are not able to earn money to keep themselves going. It's businesses going bust or waiting for government loans to keep them afloat.

It's NHS staff, care workers and others rushed off their feet trying to help others, all the while putting themselves in danger. It's parents trying to work from home surrounded by screaming children; families trapped in inner-city tenement buildings, unable to get out; older, more vulnerable people isolated in our own homes, wondering if and when it will be our turn to be struck down; the leader of our nation in hospital intensive care, fighting for his life (as he was a week or 2 back). And once this is all over, there will be a hugely deep, damaging, worldwide economic recession that may take a generation to recover from.

It's easy to pick up a sense of panic from the news headlines and the endless TV coverage- to feel hopeless, alone, and frankly panicky.

In effect, we're living Easter Saturday! Except of course, as Christians, we're NOT! We don't *need* to be stuck in Easter Saturday! That's not where we live any more. Tony Campolo has a sermon entitled, *"It's Friday, but Sunday is coming!"* He's looking at the world and at our lives right now, and seeing some of the tragedy, despair, the sheer evil that characterised the day that Jesus was murdered. And he's saying, *"Yes, this = real enough, but it isn't the last word. Sunday is coming. Resurrection day! The day when all wrongs are right, when despair is turned to joy; when the Lord comes in glory."*

And really this is the message of 1 Corinthians 15. This time in our lives feels to many like a very dark Friday. But Sunday is coming, and that makes all the difference! In particular, there are 5 great trumpet blasts of hope that are sounded here.....

## **1. SIN IS DEALT WITH.**

Okay, so that might sound to some people more like a squeak than a trumpet blast! Sin probably is not right at the top of most people's anxiety lists right now! But just for a moment, forget about Coronavirus.

Most of the things that are wrong in our world are because of the wrong choices we make and the wrong things we do. They are because of something messed up inside each one of us. We're like cars where the steering has gone. A car with dodgy steering may be possible to control to some degree. But leave it to itself and it's always going to end up in a ditch or hitting a lamp post or something. This twistedness is what the Bible calls sin.

Sin rejects God and cuts us adrift from our creator. And each of us lives with the consequences of it :

- a war inside our heads between what we are and what we know we should be.
- regrets and guilt as we consider our past
- broken relationships as we reach out to others
- and above all, a broken relationship with God which we can't repair.

Sin, the Bible tells us, is a sentence of death. For ever.

So at every time and in every circumstance, being forgiven and accepted into God's family is wonderfully good news! Including now. Jesus' death on the cross achieves it. His resurrection declares it. Because Jesus died for our sins and came back from death loving us, we can be sure beyond doubt that in Jesus our sin is well and truly dealt with, and as we trust in Christ we are fully accepted by God .

It may not seem the most dramatic trumpet blast of hope, but it is the foundation for everything that follows.

## **2. HEAVEN IS OPEN.**

People in difficult circumstances sometimes ask the question, "*Where is God?*" And the answer is, "*He's right here!*" Jesus is "Immanuel": God with us. Because of Jesus, heaven has been opened to us.

Right at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, at his baptism, we're told that "*he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove*". God has come near in Jesus! Fast forward now to the end of the gospel story. On the morning of resurrection Jesus gives Mary Magdalene a message for his disciples. "*Tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*". The open heaven is now ours! We can have the same relationship to Father God that Jesus experienced on earth. Through the Holy Spirit, God is delighted to open up to us his presence, his love, his power, Himself.

This means we're no longer alone or isolated. On Easter Sunday, there are the 11 disciples, locked away in their room. They're self-isolating, because they're fearful of what the Jewish authorities might do to them. But social isolation does not shut out the Lord Jesus. Walls and locked doors don't keep him out. Nobody's unlocked the bolt; nobody's lifted the latch, but suddenly there's Jesus right in middle of the room with them. Lockdown does not lock out the Lord!

I became a Christian for the first time nearly 58 years ago. The padre at the Crusader camp I went to had been a missionary to Tibet when the Communist Chinese marched in. He had been captured, brain-washed, subjected to all kinds of mistreatment. Most of time, over a period of years, he had been held in an isolation cell. But I've heard him and I've read his books; and for this man entirely on his own in a seemingly hopeless situation, every page and every day was filled with a sense of the presence of Christ. Locked doors could not keep God out. Everything else was closed to him, but heaven was open.

In words of the song, "Your love never fails, it never gives up, it never runs out on me". It's a thought that's lifted straight out of Romans chapter 8..... *I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

## **3. THE POWERS OF EVIL HAVE BEEN BROKEN.**

Ranged against Jesus on the cross were the power of Rome's domineering imperial might; the prejudices of power-hungry religious leaders; the hatred of small minds and closed hearts; the indifference of Pontius Pilate and the professional soldiers for whom Jesus was merely collateral damage. And (behind it all) there was the evil and the fury of hell.

The resurrection of Jesus shouts out to us that they lost and Jesus won!! Colossians 2: 15 (in the Contemporary English Version) puts it this way : *On the X, Christ defeated all the powers and forces. He let the whole world see them being led away as prisoners when he celebrated his*

*victory!"* Almost Jesus' last words on this earth were "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me". Paul reflects that great truth in 1 Cor 15: 25 ...*He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.*

So what does this say to us in our situation?

There is a phrase that comes over and over again in the old Authorised Version of the Bible : "*It came to pass*". Really that only means, "It happened". But those words are also *literally* true. Coronavirus, illness, money troubles, family troubles and all the rest: it comes, and it will pass. None of it is forever. None of it is the last word! As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, the things that are seen are temporary: the things that are unseen are eternal. All the pain and all the mess of today falls under that phrase: "*It came ... to pass*"!

And this should change our mindset. We talk about people and things being "under the circumstances". *How are you, under the circumstances? Under the circumstances, we're not doing too badly. I'm bearing up under the circumstances.* Hey! As Christians, we are not "*under the circumstances*" and we're not defined by our circumstances.

- We're under the sovereign care of our creator.
- We're under the unshakable promises of our heavenly Father.
- We're under the redeeming blood of Christ.
- We're under the unwavering protection of the Holy Spirit

.....because the powers of evil have been broken for ever in the cross and resurrection of Jesus!

#### **4. GOD'S NEW CREATION HAS BEGUN.**

I like those rainbows you see in people's windows. They're nice, cheery, colourful expressions of hope. "*Always look on the bright side of life*". It's nice.

But for us as Christians the rainbow carries a far more powerful message. The rainbow appears in Genesis 9 after the great flood. The world as people had known it had been swept away, but the rainbow appears and God says, "*Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth*". After the cataclysm is over, God is still there, still committed to his creation, still ready to build a new world. The rainbow is a sign of God's love, God's promise, God's new creation.

After the cataclysm of the cross, the resurrection of Jesus carries the same message. New creation is coming into being in Christ. 1 Corinthians 15: 22 puts like this, "*As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*". An old creation is coming to an end, and a new creation has begun in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Where is it going to end? Eph. 1 tells us..."*God made known to us the mystery of his will which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ*". One day everything is going to come together in and under Christ.

We don't know what is going to happen with this world. In the best possible scenario, it appears that the sun will expand and incinerate us all. In roughly 7 ½ billion yrs, they say, so we have a little time left still! If you listen to mainstream science, it seems very possible that we will make the earth uninhabitable far sooner. Within several generations. But when this world is no more, God's promise in Christ is a new heavens and a new earth : a new creation with no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain..... but saturated with the presence of God.

When a woman goes into labour, there's often a mixture of emotions. There is apprehension of course. It's a difficult, very painful, and sometimes a dangerous time. But I think generally our over-riding feeling is excitement : a new life is coming into being!

In Luke 21, Jesus outlines a very difficult, painful future. A future when "*people will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world*". A time far worse than anything we are experiencing.

But for God's people, that's not a reason to despair, because the pains are not the death throes of everything, but the labour pains, the birth pangs of God's new creation. So Jesus goes on to say, "*When you see all these things begin to take place, **look up** for your redemption is near.*" (verse 28) Don't look down: look up!

God's new creation has begun and we are going to be a part of it.

*<sup>51</sup>" Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – <sup>52</sup>in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup>For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality". (1 Cor 15: 51-53).*

And that brings us to the 5<sup>th</sup> great trumpet blast of hope –

## **5. DEATH IS DEFEATED.**

In v 19, Paul says "*if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied*".

Indeed, you could say that *anyone* whose hopes are bounded by life here and now is to be pitied! But for most of the people around us, their hopes are indeed only for this life; and sometimes as a result their response to coronavirus is one that verges on panic. For them death is a sentence that hangs over every joy, every hope, every achievement, and every relationship they have. It is the full stop at the end of all hope.

Because of Jesus, we are NOT in that place. In the aftermath of Easter, death is not yet destroyed, but it is already defeated. It is no longer the last word. If you are a Christian, it just means that you will meet God a little earlier than you had been expecting!

Now, I'm not sure I'm entirely logical about this, but on the whole I'd rather not die just yet! I'd like to see our grandchildren grow up. I like to think that Sue needs me (though probably she doesn't!!). In actual fact, in saying that, I'm probably being little greedy. After all, I have already outlived almost all my ancestors. We visited a museum in Tetbury which included records from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Those records featured someone described as an "*exceptionally old man*". He was 67!!

In these coming months, I may die. So may you. But if we do, it is not the end of our world! I don't expect that the love of God that has held me for the last 57 yrs is about to drop me when breathe my last breath. I serve a risen saviour, and I expect to live again with him.

Actually, of course, it's better than that! Paul in 1 Corinthians tells us that death in Christ is like a dry, wrinkled seed falling into ground, emerging in God's springtime as a glorious flower or a majestic tree. We will be wonderfully transformed! We die perishable, but we are raised imperishable. Our old decaying body dies, but we live again, ageless! If death is the worst that can happen to us through this corona virus, that's fabulously good news!!

*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in*

*victory.<sup>155</sup> 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (v.54 – 7).*

And so what? I want us to do 2 things with all this.

First, let's encourage our own hearts. Let's feed our souls with God's life-giving truth. Let's look up instead of looking down.

But then secondly, let's be beacons of hope in our world. People have all kinds of needs at a time like this. They need practical help (all the things the NHS and essential services provide). They need compassion (and it's been brilliant to see the ways people are caring for each other in the current situation.). They need humour and a bit of light relief . (I love the rainbows, and I love people who make us laugh).

But people are *gasping* for HOPE, and we have that in Christ. These are days when we have a special opportunity to *live* that hope, and as we get the chance, also to *speak* it into the lives of those around us – neighbours, carers, family, the folks we meet in the street who seem readier to share conversations with us than ever before.

.....

Sadly, at this stage I can't offer you the usual tea and cakes! But I wonder if you'd like to join me in the following prayer?

*Father God, as we look at our world, it's possible to feel the negativity and fear those first disciples felt on Easter Saturday. But as we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us, we're reminded that we have everything to hope for! Thank you that in Jesus we have the forgiveness of our sins, an open heaven. Thank you that evil was overcome, that a new creation was born, that death's days are now numbered.*

*Bring your truth home to us, so we are empowered to live with compassion, joy, and a Christ-given confidence. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, and by your grace use our lives and our words to speak into lives of our families, our carers, the people we meet in the shops, the folks we greet (at arms' length) on our streets; into all who share our lives. And as we do this, may Jesus Christ will be made known, and his name honoured.*