

Bishop's Sermon – Easter Day

“I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31: 3)

God's word through the prophecy of Jeremiah speaks to us on Easter Day directly of God's good news. Good news for the people of Israel centuries ago; good news confirmed on Easter Day that God had not abandoned Jesus to death; good news for us today, and for our perplexed society and troubled world.

I have loved you – you the people of Israel, you Jesus Christ, you and me. “I have loved you with an everlasting love”. That profound reassurance of community and individual worth, for us as for his own Son, is a truth which God proclaims today. Those who are depressed, demoralised, and not much valued by others or by society, perhaps feel the power of that truth more than others of us. To see God's love for Jesus, the victim of a trumped up charge, a vindictive judgment, and a barbaric death, so triumphantly vindicated in the resurrection gives all of us in our anxieties and disappointments a confidence in God. This is not just good news for the dying, nor consolation for the desperate, but the place where we find confidence to be truly the person God makes us to be, to gain self-respect, and to show to all the honour that is their due in the divine economy.

Easter is nothing if it is not about freedom and life. Jesus is freed from the constraints of the tomb and raised to new life. St. Matthew records that “an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone, and sat on it”. I always smile, may I add in parentheses, at those last few words for the thought of the angel nonchalantly sitting on the stone after the earthquake and after rolling it away, seems distinctly matter-of-fact. The angel announces that Jesus is freed and very soon Jesus meets the two women saying to them, again in a strangely matter-of-fact way, “Greetings!” Jesus is both free and alive.

The risk is that the Easter message proclaimed by Jeremiah in advance, as it were, - “I have loved you with an everlasting love” – enables us to slide into a complacency which can follow from feeling comfortable or pleased with ourselves. Above the sundial on the parish church tower at Offchurch, near Leamington Spa, is an inscription. ‘Don't forget to live’. That is an important nudge for us because we do sometimes forget to live. Sir Francis Drake put it well in one of his prayers, drawn to my attention by a parish priest in this city.

“Disturb us, Lord, when
...we have dreamed too little,

When we arrive safely,
Because we have sailed too close to the shore.”

“Disturb us, Lord, when...
we have lost our thirst
for the waters of life...
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
of the new Heaven to dim.”

“We ask you to push back
the horizons of our hopes.”

Today we are reminded never to settle for the obvious and the readily achievable. Of course most of us can make do with the life we have but we are called on in a faith which is living and lively. St. Matthew has begun his gospel by noting the great joy of the magi, the first witnesses of Jesus’ birth; he ends it with the great joy of the first witnesses to the resurrection. The joy we share today is to be carried out and on into life.

This joy is not something we manufacture for ourselves. I am not asking you to clench your fists, grit your teeth, and try harder – though the Christian life in the power of the resurrection does demand our energy and commitment. I invite you to let God do what he is seeking to do. Trust him for calling you and us into new life as he raised Jesus to life.

Both Jeremiah in our first reading and St. Luke in our second from Acts of the Apostles make that clear. Luke outlines the core of the faith in his great summary of Christ’s life and ministry. He highlights what God has done and does. God sent messages to Israel down the ages, he sent Jesus to preach peace, he anointed him, Jesus did good and healed and, after the crucifixion, God raised him. Jeremiah’s promise of God’s everlasting love is followed by a tame-sounding assurance, “I have continued my faithfulness to you.” Scholars tell us that this translation fails to do justice to the original which includes a sense of God pulling or drawing Israel along on account of his love for them. Perhaps in this instance the NIV has it closer and better – I have loved you with an everlasting love, “I have drawn you with loving kindness.”

Let us allow ourselves then to be drawn along by God, through his loving kindness, into life. We are renewed in our understanding that the question, ‘Is it life enhancing?’ is primary to our Christian witness and service. Freedom and life are the hallmarks of the resurrection, and commitment to them must be the test of the Church and its ministry. If we say or do nothing when they are denied, we fall short of the gospel imperative. When we stand and speak for what is life-giving we live Christ’s risen life.

It would not be improper for a bishop on Easter Day to comment at this point on those situations in our nation and in the world where, all too clearly, the

lives of our fellow men and women are being significantly restricted and to praise those who so courageously stand and speak for what is life enhancing. But today I speak of principles rather than examples, lest being too specific seems to restrict our concern. Most of us might better concentrate this Eastertide on making a genuine difference where we are, encouraging what is life enhancing in the immediate, the local and the modest – in the many small societies we can influence rather than pontificating about a big society.

The Easter faith began small, as St. Matthew records, with the witness of those two Marys, and grew from there. We need to notice that and know that our witness and service of the risen Christ in our community or street, family or school, church and clubs, is significant and important. That is a priority and must never be skimped because of our preference to dabble in, or posture on, national or international issues. We are called first to enhance the life and vitality of our community and church, to seek the kingdom of the risen Christ here, before we look there.

That lifting of our sights and vision is not first to the distant, but from here to there. As Drake put it;

“We ask You (Lord) to push back
The horizons of our hopes,
And to push us into the future
In Strength, courage, hope and love.”

Don't forget to live!