



EASTER

SUNDAY

A SUNDAY LIKE NO OTHER

LOVE IS OUR FOUNDATION

This is a Sunday like no other I have experienced in my lifetime, in any of our lifetimes in fact. It is the first time for over 800 years that the churches in this country have been closed on Easter day. The last time was when there was a dispute between Pope Innocent III and King John over who should be the next Archbishop of Canterbury. The ensuing argument led to the closure all the churches in England and Wales from March 1208 to July 1214. The situation today is similar, in that the buildings are closed, but in all other respects it is quite different. Our churches are not closed because of an argument, but because of a virus. They are not closed out of petty anger, but out of love for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Love is the foundation of all we do as Christians (Mt. 2:37-39) and it is the foundation of Jesus' life, his ministry, and his death. Who can forget the words of John's gospel:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It is love that connects the time we are in now to the events that we celebrate today. Love is our foundation.

HOLY WEEK FOR THE HOUSEBOUND

So as we reflect on who Jesus is this Easter and who we are as a church I cannot help but draw comparisons between the situation we find ourselves in today and the events of Holy Week. On Good Friday, Jesus Christ was crucified and died. Similarly, the churches in our benefice are closed right now and it can feel like they too are dead for the buildings are now empty shells. There is no worship within them, no gathering of people, no signs of life. In fact, the

only “life” at our churches at the moment are the lives we commend to God at graveside funerals!

Moving on to Holy Saturday, we remember Jesus laid in the tomb and the disciples mourning and waiting in fear for what might happen next. We too are in a season of waiting. For many of us our lives currently feel like they are on hold. Some of us have lost jobs, some of us have been furloughed, some of us have been told we cannot leave the house. The children in our benefice cannot go to school or see friends or grandparents. For our churches we are waiting to be able to meet and worship together once more. For all of us, in one way or another, our lives feel like they are on pause and we are desperately waiting for someone to hit play. For others of us, the waiting is much more like the disciples - full of fear. Fear for ourselves because we are classified as being particularly vulnerable to the Coronavirus or fear for the fate of a friend or loved one we know who is in hospital fighting for their life. Finally, for a few of us, just like the disciples this is a time of mourning for those we love and have lost to this virus.

In some small way our lives at the moment reflect the experience of Jesus Christ and his disciples over holy week.

HOPE & TRANSFORMATION

But as Christians we know that this is not where the story ends. Amidst this death, mourning, and waiting we have good news! We have hope! For today is the day we celebrate the death of death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ! For in Christ's resurrection we see that the death no longer has any power,. Jesus didn't just return as a ghostly apparition appearing to his disciples from the grave but returned in bodily form, eating with his disciples (Lk 24:40-43), letting them touch him (Jn 20:24-29). In his resurrection Jesus has done two things that I would like to draw your attention to today: he has transformed the world and he has provided hope.

RESURRECTION TRANSFORMATION

Jesus' death and resurrection are the culmination of Jesus'

incarnation. God's plan, that he had from the beginning of time, was for all creation to be saved by Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:4-5) and as we heard earlier from John's gospel, it was out of his love that he did this.

In the incarnation, God unites himself to creation in the form of Jesus Christ and so unites our fates together. Jesus was subject to everything that we are, even death. When Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning our fate was transformed. Just as Christ was united to humanity in his death, so too is humanity now united to resurrection life through Christ. Everyone who unites themselves to Christ by faith can now share in this resurrection. Easter transformed humanity.

RESURRECTION HOPE

With this Easter transformation accessible for all humanity Jesus Christ has provided us all with hope. Hope that the life we lead has purpose, that it is more than just the sum of our years on earth and hope that there is life after death.

Jesus made the purpose for the disciples clear, he said to them "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:48). The disciples saw and knew what Jesus had done. Now Jesus was sending them into the world with this knowledge to tell everyone else. Each new day God gave them was for this purpose. But it was not just to be shared with those who did not know the gospel, but with each other as well. Why do you think there are so many letters written in the Bible - because believers were sharing knowledge of God with one another.

The disciples could live out this purpose confidently because they have the hope of eternal life. When faced with troubles and opposition the disciples had hope that an even better future awaited them.

TRANSFORMATION AND HOPE FOR TODAY

Just as the story of Holy Week did not end on Holy Saturday but went on to provide hope and transformation I believe the same is

true for us today as we wait for the restrictions from Coronavirus to end and our own Easter Sundays to begin.

OUR HOPE

There is a noticeable fear across this nation at the prospect of Coronavirus affecting us and those that we love but the Christian faith speaks into this fear in two ways. Firstly, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ we now have direct access to God. This was symbolised by the curtain of the temple being torn in two. The curtain that separated the Holy of Holies, the place where God was said to dwell, was no longer a barrier to accessing God. This means that when we are praying for those who are affected by Coronavirus, be it key workers or those who are ill, we can now raise our concerns and fears directly to God. Not only this, but when we do not have the words to express our feelings we have God's Holy Spirit (sent to us when the resurrected Jesus returned to his Father) and Jesus himself interceding for us (Rom. 8:26, 34).

Another hope we have is that if any of us or those we know are taken by this virus Christ has made it that this life is no longer the end, we can face death head on with hope. This does not make the experience any less painful to go through, but it does provide hope.

There is also hope for our churches. At the beginning of this sermon I spoke about the last time the churches in England and Wales could not celebrate Easter in their buildings. Although there are differences between then and now we can draw hope from this history. We have no written records of how the church communities in England and Wales continued to practice during this time or how they would have continued to grow in faith but we do know one thing for certain - the church survived!

As a benefice, we too will survive this closure but it may not look exactly the same as we left it.

OUR TRANSFORMATION

As we sit in our homes, mourning the loss of being able to meet together in our church buildings let this be a time to prepare to be

transformed. This transformation is already taking place, we are finding new ways of being church, new ways of worshipping, new ways of praying, new ways of serving. This is because the Church has never been a building but a kingdom of people who follow Jesus Christ. The Bible uses many illustrations relating to buildings to describe the Church, for example Ephesians 2:19-22:

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

But notice although the words household, temple, structure, and cornerstone are used in these verses, words all relating to bricks and mortar buildings, the verses are describing the people who follow Jesus. Because the Church is people, not buildings. Just as our lives will have been transformed when we get out the other side of Coronavirus, so too will who we are as the people of God..

Although it is likely that many things will revert to they way they were before the church buildings were closed let us take joy in how we are transformed. Let us not forget the ways that we have grown in our faith and the new ways we have expressed our spirituality during this time and just like the disciples did in sharing the news of the resurrection, let us share our own stories of transformation with one another.

So let us rejoice in the hope and transformation that we have received from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ this Easter, that promise of eternal life; and let us also hold on to the hope and transformation that is present in our churches right now and also awaits us on the other side of Coronavirus.