

Easter Sermon 2022

Easter is wonderful, Easter is life, Easter is hope Easter is the core of Christian belief. I wonder what food will be upon your tables today – possibly like Christmas a feast of special food perhaps roast lamb or lots of wonderful roast and grilled vegetables. I wonder if you would serve a plate of candy floss – I quite like a little candy floss – quite popular round these parts of course. It is of course rather enticing fluffy and sweet but of little nutritional value.

In my second parish we were very fortunate to have a real icon of the resurrection. It was painted by a Russian emigre during the Second World War and given to the church. Christ goes down into hell and is dragging Adam out through the burst tomb and into heaven – almost whether Adam likes it or not.

As Christians we need to be careful that our faith, our Easter faith does not segue into theological candy floss – a happy ending to a sad story that ultimately has little to say to a world and people who are in great need. Trite and nice happy endings have little to say to those grieving nursing their dying, loosing their countries and cultures, watching the environment implode, struggling to survive economically or socially. We are to counter such escapist emptiness of candy floss by the world and even some in the church to some nice ethics, ideas and pleasant pastime - when time permits.

Our belief is historic, real and contemporary. Historic because Jesus lived and died and yes his resurrection may be a matter of faith and not in the same historic category as his crucifixion but it is an event for us. Our faith is real because it wholly embraces real life in all its darkness and light. It is contemporary because the world and people are groaning to be reconciled to their true purpose and state. The story of Jesus and especially of Holy Week is the battle between a self-centred grasping world and the self-giving love of God in Christ. Today is the victory of God's love over humanity's misuse of freedom.

Today we celebrate that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Note he didn't come back to life, or defy death of his own accord but was raised. It was an act of God. We can see the terror and fear of a few disciples gradually transformed days later; proclaiming to Jews and others that they

had seen met and even touched Jesus. They proclaim Him as real food not candy floss, a means of real deliverance to a frustrated world. The evidence is there and deserves both consideration by the sceptic and critiquing by the uncritical. The evidence is really threefold; firstly the existence of the church after the seeming debacle. Secondly the showing of Jesus to the Apostles at different times they don't see and then do, hear and not yet understand, they touch and don't touch. There is a mixture of bodily and visionary. It is not neat but the effect is objective. Thirdly the tomb is empty – oh how those in authority would have longed to find the body but never did.

We must study and criticise yes but above all grow to understand the nature of Belief. It is not about knowledge and having everything sewn up. It is about relationship and the best relationships centre on love faith and trust. As between parent and child, god-parent and god-child and many other relationships represented here today.

Yesterday a friend sent me a child's answer as to why Jesus went to hell after he died? 'Maybe he was looking for his friend, Judas.'

The classic orthodox iconography centres of course on the transition between Holy Saturday and Easter day Holy Saturday is a much misunderstood day, suspended awkwardly between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, seemingly of no great spiritual significance. Jesus is buried: we are left wondering and waiting. But for the Lord, it was the day he descended to Hades/Hell/Sheol and conquered eternal death. Mary was distraught, the disciples were weeping, Judas was hanging, and the Romans, Pharisees and Sadducees were rejoicing. But Jesus was descending to the place of departed spirits to preach the Good News and liberate the captives.

It is writ large in the Apostles creed and writings of earliest Christian fathers. It is written and alluded to in scripture. (eg Acts 2:31; Eph 4:8-10; 1 Pt 3:18-20). You might even consider that challenging parable for our time of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) relevant, and also Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross – 'Today shalt thou be with me in paradise' (Lk 23:42f).

Some of course do not feel they have to leave this world to experience hell – let us be sure that our faith may speak to them – even if it is in the silence of just being alongside them.

The Christian is called to live in two worlds. In this world in the midst of all its harsh realities – not dismissing them or offering candy floss diversions. He/she is also called to live as an heir of the resurrection – a heightened sensitivity to the sufferings of this world but a heavenly hope (not optimism) that brings strength serenity and the darkest of situations. This is only possible if we hold fast and follow to the Christ of our world and of history, who washes the feet of those he loves the Christ who offers himself in bread and wine, the Christ who agonises in the garden, who dies and prays for the whole world on the cross and the Christ who goes down into hell to drag us up to heaven.