

## EASTER DAY

4<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2021

Isaiah 25.6-9

Psalm 118. 1-2, 14-24

Acts of the Apostles 10. 34-43

Mark 16. 1-8a

Throughout COVID Chris and I have given ourselves over to some binge viewing. Many hours have been – I'm not sure if lost is the word – maybe enjoyed, watching series after series of mostly crime shows. On Friday night we started the seventh series of the British spy drama: Spooks – having already waded through six series - and after two episodes of series seven we decided that it was all too neat. The formula goes like this: a national crisis emerges which will threaten the very safety and life of London – if not the whole of Britain; the team is not sure that they are up to it but after some handwringing and threats of politicians and bureaucrats intervening to prevent or undermine the mission they press on; but time has been lost and the fatal deadline approaches; will they save the day, or not? Every episode, with only seconds to spare, the crisis is averted and the realm is able to carry on as beacon of democratic liberty and freedom. After Friday night's episode, we decided it was all too tidy. The formula seemed almost as repetitive as Mid-Somer Murder's diet of three murders per episode. The same formula, repeated every time. Good triumphs over evil; the good guys win; the day is saved, the Empire is preserved.

Mark gives us no such tidy end: *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

What sort of an ending is this, we might well ask? Mark did not shuffle off the mortal coil immediately he had penned these words. What we have been schooled to think is the great victory, the resurrection appearance by Jesus, wasn't torn off or lost from the original manuscript. This is the way the writer intended to finish it. *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

Scholars are clear and in agreement that this is the way it is meant to end, in spite of a tidy ending being added in the century after the gospel was written. But because this is the first of the gospels to be written it leaves us with some questions. Untidy questions. Questions which we need to wrestle with. Questions which are each generations to struggle with and so are also ours; no one can answer them for us. But there are some clues which lie in the text and in what has led up to this morning on the first day of the week.

If we go back to the afternoon of the day of the crucifixion, darkness descended on the land from noon until three in the afternoon. It was at three o'clock that Jesus cries out *my God my God, why have you forsaken me.* If you recall, at this moment the curtain in the Holy of Holies in the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. This tearing open echoes the tearing open of the heavens at Jesus' baptism when we hear the voice from heaven. *'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* As the temple curtain is torn apart, the place where God is understood to dwell – the Holy of Holies – the place where god is encountered, is suddenly torn open. And in this divine action we also hear an echo of the prophet Isaiah: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*

What do we make of these strange events? Of the not so straightforward resurrection appearance by Jesus? Surely we could be given something clearer than frightened and bewildered disciples. Where is this Father who is so pleased with the Son? Where in this dereliction and abandonment? Where is God to be found in this cosmic silence, which envelops the cross?. We cannot disconnect the events of the Friday from what takes place on this morning. This is the moment when longings and prophecies come to fruition. In truth, a new creation is breaking forth on this first day of the week as the sun rises.

The tomb is the site of the intersection between heaven and earth – the angel meets the women and reassures them with the divine greeting: fear not. These women who have not abandoned Jesus, who have remained with him right through all the trials are present in their devotion to still tend to the body of their friend and teacher.

The message they are given is for the ones who did abandon Jesus. The message is that it is not over. Although they have been ashamed of Jesus, he is not ashamed of them and will not abandon them. This is a moment of reinstatement. A moment which is forgiveness and an invitation to begin again, to not abandon or neglect the work Jesus called them to and in which they have participated.

The theologian James Alison, who always presents us with a use of language which upsets our usual ways of thinking says that in the event of the resurrection, Jesus comes back to the disciples as forgiveness. He doesn't bestow forgiveness; doesn't give them a little lecture about what bad and faithless boys they have been and remind them how terrible they were to abandon him. He comes as forgiveness and in his presence, it is imparted – it is the presence of grace.

Too often in our giving and receiving of forgiveness there remains a power play, a memory of past wrongs, an imbalance of the score sheet, which we keep in our hip pockets, just in case things turn sour again. But the invitation that the women are to carry is one which implicitly carries forgiveness in it. Let's start again where we left off.

Jesus has left the tomb and gone ahead of the disciples and Peter to Galilee; they are invited to follow. So comes again the call which Jesus makes throughout the gospel: Follow me. It is Peter who says to Jesus in the middle of the gospel, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' The call of Jesus is to not give up the quest, the search, the following. And the following invariably includes the cross. This is not some bright and shiny clean morning but it carries within it the pathos and anguish of Friday.

This our lives. A mix of chiaroscuro; as in the painting by Caravaggio from Friday; light and dark. Our lives invariably involve experiences of degradation, moments of my God, my God? Moments when we are not sure we can begin again. Moments when we have been given a cross to carry, a cross we don't want to carry and on which we find ourselves brought to the brink of a living death.

These things come to us in their own way. As Paula D'Arcy says: God comes us disguised as our life. And maybe we emerge from these experiences full of self-recrimination or shame, or hatred and bitterness. Or, maybe our image of who or what we should have been lies in tatters, maybe an image given to us by someone else or our society to carry, and we begin to emerge from what seemed like living death. We are not remade polished bright, without the wounds, but we emerge with them, glorious wounds, the means of us coming to a resurrected experience of life. And we are invited to begin again in some new way; maybe sloughing off the old way; beginning

again without the baggage that someone else gave us to carry. And we are free. Ready to be filled with joy.

The instruction of the angel is that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee – there they will see him. All the while they were with Jesus there was some level at which the disciples never understood – did not see. As we would not understand also. But in the cross their illusions have been stripped away – about Jesus and about themselves - and they will now be able to see the nature of the God Jesus has pointed to. As it for us when our illusions are stripped from us – we then are able to see the true nature of grace and mercy which is God. And so be resurrected.

Jesus calls us to follow, follow more deeply into life, follow more deeply into the heart of God and have the illusions of what we are led to believe matters stripped from us. In this way we are free to live fully and to extend the love we have seen in Jesus into the world around us – in order that Jesus may be seen, still and we know ourselves as children of God.

Andrew Boyle