

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 21st April 2019

Easter Day

Revd Val Reid

Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

Acts 10: 34-43

Luke 24: 1-12

*'Seculosity' – we are all searching for salvation, but performancism is not the answer.
Where is our alleluia in a cold and broken world?*

Sermon

A group of Christians walk from Birmingham to London carrying a cross made of knives. On Friday evening they hold a service in Parliament Square to commemorate victims of knife crime. Last year nearly 700 school-age children were stabbed in the West Midlands. What is the answer? Where is our salvation hope?

Their protest was rather overshadowed in the media by the Extinction Rebellion protest. Demonstrators have closed Parliament Square and Oxford Circus and Waterloo Bridge, and glued themselves to a train in Canary Wharf. Greta Thunberg has passionately harangued the EU leaders for holding three emergency summits on Brexit, but not one on the crisis facing our environment. Even David Attenborough has stopped pulling his punches and warned us that we are facing catastrophe. What is the answer? Where is our salvation hope?

Just a month ago Cyclone Idai hit Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. More than a thousand people have died. Three million have been affected by the devastation it caused. The recovery costs for infrastructure and people's livelihoods is estimated at \$2 billion. In the first 24 hours of its appeal, the Disasters Emergency Committee raised £8 million. Since then, this has risen to £18 million. It's generous, but it's not nearly enough. The story has vanished from our newspapers and our attention has moved on. And in one day this week nearly \$1 billion dollars was raised to re-build Notre Dame. What is the answer? Where is our salvation hope?

This is our world.

A world where there is no promise of safety.
Where storms devastate the poorest countries.
Where climate change threatens all of us – but the poorest the most.
Because they live in the most vulnerable places.
Where risk is inherent in living.
Where violence is endemic.
But our poorest communities live with the greatest threat from knife crime.
Where our priorities can get a bit confused.

What does Easter have to say to our world?

This is a world which would have been familiar to Jesus.
And to his first disciples.
Perhaps not environmental catastrophe.
Not yet.
But they had seen first-hand the human consequences of political oppression.
They had seen their friend and teacher arrested, subjected to a rigged trial, tortured, executed.
They knew that they were not safe either.
Even Peter, that rock, that most robust and trusting disciple, had pretended that he didn't know Jesus.
To save his own skin.

What did Easter have to say to that world of two millennia ago?

On Friday evening I went to hear a performance of James McMillan's 'Seven last words from the cross'.
It was extraordinary.
Powerful.
Devastating.
At the end I was in tears – and so were several members of the choir.

As I sat down to write this sermon yesterday, it made me wonder.
Why is it so inspiring to be immersed in a visceral musical reflection on death and dying?
And why was I finding it so hard to find something equally powerful – more powerful! – to say about resurrection?

In his recent book, 'Seculosity', David Zahl claims that we all – believers, agnostics and atheists alike – have religious urges.
We all seek for meaning, for answers, for solutions to the problems of our lives – and the problems of our world.
We hunger for what Zahl calls a feeling of 'enough-ness' – the conviction that things makes sense.
That it will be alright in the end.
That our existence has been validated.

The thing is, most of us seek it not in the traditional teachings of the church, not in the Easter message, but in the secular 'solutions' of our world.

In technology.

In romance.

In economics.

In politics.

We're clinging on to these things looking for salvation.

They are what Zahl calls replacement religion.

He suggests that we have been groomed to believe that we can earn our salvation.

Because at the heart of this secular religiosity – or secularity as he calls it – is the idea that we can sort it out.

If only we develop the right algorithm.

If only we choose the right partner.

If only we throw enough money at it.

If only we elect the right politicians.

Zahl coins another word – 'performancism.'

Our society believes we are defined by what we do.

Indeed, we are saved by what we do.

We work all the hours there are to try to justify our existence.

We eagerly buy books on self-help.

We read parenting books to understand the correct way to raise children.

We adopt the latest dietary laws – clean eating, veganism, no single use plastic in the supermarket.

We shop for the perfect date on the internet.

We demand perfect solutions from our political leaders.

The problem is that secularity doesn't work.

Enough-ness is never enough.

The Utopia we are seeking recedes over the horizon.

Our attempts to engineer our own salvation are doomed to fail.

Because we are flawed and finite creatures.

We live, all of us, in the gap between the world as it is, and the world as we want it to be.

So where do we begin looking for hope?

Where might we find salvation?

We in our church this morning are not secularists.

We are people of faith.

And at the heart of our Christian faith is the message of Easter.

A message of hope.

Of resurrection.

But I fear that we in the church are as tempted by secularity as the atheists and the agnostics.

We are just as tempted to try to earn our salvation.

To try to create our own enough-ness.

We long to be able to control our environment, to solve the world's problems with the simple strength of our faith.

And we can't.

So what does salvation look like?

What does resurrection feel like?

What difference does it make to us on this Easter morning?

What difference might it make to our world?

I tend to shy away from preaching the resurrection.

Looking back at my Easter sermons over the years, I preach about the confusion, the terror, the lack of understanding.

I preach about the women running away from the tomb in Mark's gospel, having no idea what's going on. Afraid to say anything because people would think they were mad.

I preach about the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, and the strikingly realistic note that they worshipped him, but some doubted – or perhaps they all had some doubts (the Greek isn't clear).

I preach about the difficulty of making sense of the different accounts of what happened.

I can identify with all those things.

Because the story doesn't make sense.

It is such a long way from our rational, scientific understanding of how things work.

This week it was reported that scientists in America kept the brains of pigs alive outside their bodies for 36 hours.

Dr Nenad Sestan, who led the research, explained that all they had done was detected weak electrical impulses.

There was no awareness.

No thinking, as such.

If I know anything, I know that this is not what we are talking about when we talk about resurrection.

We are talking about something so explosive, so extraordinary, so powerful, that lives were turned upside-down.

Then and now.

Actually, for me, the confusion and the terror and the discrepancies make it all the more convincing.

All the more real.

Because throughout the gospels, throughout Paul's letters to the new churches (which are earlier than the gospels), there is a powerful sense of God at work in their lives in a way that transcends rational understanding.

That turns the church from what Rowan Williams calls the 'Jesus of Nazareth Society' into the living, breathing body of Christ.

And what those first disciples realised was that the resurrection was the still point of the turning world.

The place where all their histories and all their futures converged.

The moment when the person they had known, and loved, and travelled with, and then lost, became the one who was with them now and for ever.

Not always easily recognisable.
Certainly not easily controllable.
But once and for all the world has changed.

Something has happened within history, that has altered our assumptions about what is and isn't possible.
Our understanding of who God is – and who we are – is utterly transformed.
There is no going back.
God is let loose in the world.

And those first disciples found that they thought bigger, thought different.
They learned that there was more to the world than they had ever thought.
More to themselves than they had ever imagined.
Not because of performancism – not because they suddenly had superhuman powers, or became perfect human beings, or knew all the right answers.
But because they recognised that, in Christ, it was finished.
Completed.
Accomplished.
God had fundamentally re-arranged the nature of creation.
And our place in it.

Not something we engineered for ourselves.
But something God did which is beyond our comprehension and our explanations.

And I'm glad it is beyond my comprehension and my explanations.
Because if I could define what happened, or turn it into a DIY guide to resurrection, then I would know I was back to secularity.
My own self-help religion.

This is God doing God's thing, in a way that is totally beyond me.
Alleluia.

And what that means is that we are all called to live in this world – this world of poverty and violence and inequality and climate disaster – as though we were living out of a completely different story.
A story in which the world's economy of binary opposites – my success means your failure, your financial security means my gig economy job – is not the final answer.
In God's economy it's not like that.
Those with all the power get down on their knees to wash each other's feet.
Those bent double for years will stand up straight.
Those alienated from their community because of their mental or physical health will be welcomed back inside.

You, like me, might be looking round our world and saying 'well, I don't see much evidence of that.'
But St Augustine, in his book 'The City of God', said that the kingdom of God is, in effect, the lives of the saints.

And by saints he didn't mean St Peter, or St Francis, or even St Theresa of Calcutta.
He meant ordinary people, like you and me, who live out of that resurrection story.

And that resurrection story is not just about me being a more lively Christian.
Though that would be a start.

Christians believe that the resurrection is the event on which the salvation of the whole world turns.
It's not like the flood, where creation is wiped out and God starts again.

Who we are – what we are – is transfigured.

But it is not obliterated.

God works with us and in us – and in our world.

And God starts with us as we are.

Where we are.

In our ordinary lives.

And so the ordinary things of this world become sacramental when we recognise the presence of God in them.

Later in this service, when Peter will say:

Send your Holy Spirit

That these gifts of bread and wine

May be for us the body and blood of Christ

We are inviting God to do something resurrection-shaped in the middle of our worship.
To bring resurrection life to us.

Here and now.

And what we pray for and celebrate in Communion is a reminder that God is constantly doing something resurrection-shaped in us, and in our world, if we would just be awake to it.

Let's look back at our lectionary readings.

Because here we can see the beginnings of resurrection-shaped life in a few confused men and women.

At the start of our reading from Luke's gospel we are told that

...on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

'They' are the women.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and a few others.

Creeping to the tomb to anoint the body with spices, hoping they will not be seen.

Hoping they will be below the radar of the jumpy authorities.

But at least they are there.

Unlike the rest of the disciples.

The men.

They are not even taking the risk of coming out of their rooms.

The tomb is empty.

Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes appear. The women are terrified.

Usually in the Hebrew Scriptures, when angels appear with a divine message to mere mortals, they reassure them.

When Gabriel appears to Mary at the very beginning of the story of the incarnation, it's one of the first things he says.

Do not be afraid, Mary.

The Lord is with you.

But not here.

Here there is no reassurance.

But there is a message.

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

He is not here, but has risen.

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

I recognise that attitude!

Don't I have a tendency to look for God in the wrong places?

To assume that God is where I last left him?

That in this risky, dangerous world, there is nothing I can do except administer the last rites to our faith?

No wonder the 'seven last words from the cross' are so powerful.

Those women did at least creep to the tomb, early in the morning.

Still stuck in Good Friday.

No idea that there is anything but death and dying at the end of this story.

But getting on with doing what they can.

Fulfilling the rituals of death.

The necessary chores, the sort that women have done from time immemorial.

But if they had stayed at home – because they were frightened, because they thought there was no point, because they thought that nothing they could do would make any difference – if they had stayed at home, they would never have experienced resurrection.

And then Peter.

In Luke's account the women go back from the tomb to tell the 11 disciples and all the rest.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

A group of women.

Deranged by grief.

Confused.

Their story is impossible.

I recognise this attitude too!

I can't explain it.

So it can't be true.

It is Peter – Peter who denied that he knew Jesus – who goes to see for himself.

Judas, who betrayed him, could no longer live with what he had done.

Judas could not believe that forgiveness could encompass his betrayal.
That God's love was wide enough even for him.
But Peter believed it.
Somewhere inside him was the beginning of a wild and desperate hope.
Perhaps death was not the end.
Perhaps betrayal was not the end.
Perhaps there was – is – such a thing as resurrection...
Perhaps it depended not on his imperfections, but on God.
Peter didn't just go to the tomb.
He got up and ran.

And in part two of Luke's account of the Gospel story – the book of Acts – we hear Peter talking.
Once again he is being asked to think outside the box.
To invite a resurrection-shaped God into his life.
To go and visit Cornelius, a gentile.
To see for himself what God is doing, in ways that are totally unexpected.
Ways that overturn our narrow assumptions.
The restrictions we put on God.

I don't know the answer to knife crime and environmental destruction.
But I do know that it starts with me.
With us.
Not with our performancism.
But with our faith in a God who is bigger than all of our destructiveness and carelessness.
Starts with me inviting that God to create a resurrection-shaped space in my life.
Being willing to receive grace.

God is the eternal life-giver.
In God there are no dead ends.
Nothing and no-one beyond redemption.
With those women, we might allow God to break into the routines of our ordinary lives, and re-write salvation history there.
With Peter we might recognise the pattern of death and resurrection in an outsider who offers us a new perspective.
With the whole body of Christ we might believe that God offers us hope in a new reality which is – at last – enough.
And we might start living out of that story.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!