



St Marylebone
Parish Church

5th Sunday of Easter 2019
11.00am Hinde St Methodist Church

Alleuia! Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed Alleluia!
It is very good to be with you again, thank you for having me.

There we were nicely trotting through Eastertide and now, in today's Gospel reading we have been plunged back into the events of the Passion of the Lord. Today's Gospel takes us back into the shadows of the night before Christ died.

Today's readings perhaps could be summed up as a series of beginnings and endings. That's what I want to explore together this morning – endings and beginnings.

It is the end of Christ's journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. But it is the beginning of His greater journey from death to life. It is the seedbed of the Church when He instructs His apostles who will become the first Bishops and shepherds of the Church to serve as He has served – to wash feet. He gives them the Mandatum – the new commandment to Love one another as He has love them. That is to be our hallmark and calling card – our love for one another.

An ending and beginning.

New beginnings are also evident in the reading given for today from the Acts of the Apostles. It doesn't take much reading between the lines to see Early Church self-understanding tumbling off the page. S. Peter's

vision justifies the reinterpretation of Jewish food laws for the new Christian Community that is increasingly emerging as distinct from the Jewish mainstream. And, very much a part of that same movement, the incorporation of gentiles as Christian converts. What are we supposed to keep and what can we dump – who's in and who's out? The Early Church is wrestling with its identity and trying to find the way forward in this new landscape. We think our church council meetings are tough. Just imagine! Well, actually we don't have to – the New Testament records plenty of their squabbles. Beginnings can be rocky.

And the End (capital E) is placed squarely before us in those beautiful words from St John's Revelation in the second reading. The vision of the end of the age – the beatific vision. The Cosmos – all that is, has been and will be – remade and renewed and brought home to its glorious destiny in the court of our heavenly King.

Beginnings and endings and a golden thread weaving right through the lot of it - God's good plan for His creation.

When we look at this particular set of beginnings and endings, its not terribly flattering for us, it must be said.

Christ's new commandment is to love one another as He has loved, and that is how we are to be known. Well, we've been pretty poor in that regard lets face it. From history to the present day 'See how these Christians love one another' is better suited to irony than evangelism most of the time. Likewise, the Early Church's blindness and squabbling over circumcisions and strategy. And yet, Christ is faithful, God is keeping His promise of heavenly glory and the Holy Spirit still works unceasingly to bring about the beatific vision in us.

I don't say all this in an attempt to make us feel guilty or ashamed. Shame and guilt have been born by Christ on the cross, they have no place in the glorious liberty of the children of God. So, if not with guilty head-scratching, how *are* we to respond to this picture?

And I think my suggestion is – with honesty. Honest perspective and honest hope.

To look again at these beginnings and endings and say – how can we live authentically, with integrity, with just plain honesty in relation to these truths.

The truth of Jesus' commandments to the Church, the truth of our frailty in responding to our call to be the Church (Christ's Body in the world); and the truth of our destiny – which is life with Christ in God as shown in Revelation.

I wish to read a section from a book by Carlo Carretto. He spent half his life working for the poor in city slums, and half as a hermit in the Sahara desert as a Little Brother of Jesus, the order founded by St Charles de Foucauld at the start of the twentieth century.

He is sitting alone in his hermitage in the middle of the Sahara. It's not a short quotation, but Br Carlo's words are much more worth hearing than mine! He writes:

(From *In search of the beyond*)

'This sand which runs through my fingers is all that remains of past history, of the civilization which flourished in the Sahara that was once alive, teeming with life.

Some of these civilisations have left a record of themselves, superb, incredibly well-persevered inscriptions, evidence of a high degree of development.

Now the cities and villages alike have disintegrated. The sun and wind of the Sahara have reduced them to sand, mountains of sand.

Nothing has been able to resist the relentless rhythm of time, the searing wind which consumes the granite.

Will the steel of our own civilisation be able to resist any better? Will the vast complex world we know today be able to resist? The civilised world of science and culture?

And the others that are still to come, the civilisations of the future, will they hold out against the forces of time, against the sun and the wind? No, they will not resist. New York, Paris, Moscow, Beijing, Athens, Rome, all will become like these sand dunes.

It may be that the heat will simply be replaced by cold, the cold end of the world.

Everything will be reduced to sand, because sand is the symbol of death, and everything must die.

Some people imagine the possibility of a connection, or better, some kind of continuity, between the level of technology and maturity reached by human civilisations and the Kingdom of God. But they are wrong, there is no such continuity.

The Kingdom of God belongs to a different order.

If there is any connection it is a symbolic and not a real one. If there is a link it is in the fire of love, and in the white heat of the love we drew on for the difficult task of constructing the earthly city...

Our technology will end up in the sand, just like the first wheel constructed by some gazelle hunter on these same Saharan plains. Our sociology will end up in the sand, just as the legislation of the ancient civilisations finished in the sand...

At this point I can well imagine that some people are worried, even scandalised. I hear them say: 'What is the good of all our efforts, our exertions, our work? Will anything remain of the earthly city?'

Yes, love will remain.

The house will disappear, but the love that held us together will remain...this hope is given us in the resurrection of Christ.'

So how are we to make sense of this in relation to today's Scriptures. Well now we know the bigger context for all our beginnings and endings. Now we have the measuring stick by which they can be truthfully seen.

As Christians we believe that each day we are freed from sin and death by Christ and begin again. Every Sunday is a little Easter – the day of Resurrection. So this Sunday in Eastertide let us be pledged to this new thing God is doing. To begin again, however long in the tooth we are – whether this is our 35th or 85th Eastertide. All our beginnings and endings find their meaning in Christ - the alpha and omega – the first and last. He is the Word – the beginning and ending of all our stories.

Br Carlo is so starkly honest: puncturing all our nonsense, and the fantasies to which we cling, or live out as if they were true. He sheds the light of day on our squabbings and frailty – in the Early Church and in the Church today. He reminds us of our destiny; the same destiny spelt out in St John's Revelation 'the new heaven and the new earth'.

Brothers and sisters, simply being honest about all this, and living out this truth in our day to day is to be free to begin again gloriously free to love as Christ has loved us. Gloriously free to live in the hope of our destiny. Gloriously free to abandon all that does not belong to the household of God, all that clings to the Church, divides and fossilizes our love. All our empires and securities, all our egos and assumptions – it all looks like what it is: sand in the making. It takes a lifetime to see all these things for what they are. But in prayer, reading, Scripture, worship and Holy Communion, the Holy Spirit is forming us to be honest with ourselves. Let sand be sand, and the love of Jesus, be the love of Jesus. To see the true scope of our beginnings and endings and put our energy, talking, praying, working, money and time, hope and love into the love that will endure.

Its all about being honest, and living by the truths that have been revealed to us. As I say, it takes a lifetime of pilgrimage. We are a pilgrim people; an Easter people and on our pilgrimage through life 'Alleluia' is our not only our song, we are discovering that it is our native tongue. 'Alleluia' may be the most honest thing we will ever say. Let us begin and end, and everything in between in joyfully praising our Risen Lord Jesus.