

'My Lord and my God'

*Now the green blade risers from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

So wrote John Macleod Campbell Crum - a graduate of my former college, New College, and a former domestic Chaplain to a one time Bishop of Oxford - Francis Paget, whose daughter he married. The vivid imagery of growing plants and vegetation resonate easily with the amazing budding of green exploding around us as signs of new life break out - even as we continue our Corona-lockdown.

These explosions of colour and life remind us as I said in my first Thought for the Day (all of which are available on our website) that we are each called to be an 'Apostolate of Hope': called to grow seeds of hope and tenderness. We have to try to stand firm against the paralysing uncertainty about our future. We have to try and grow through the experience of mastering despair in the face of problems around us.

Into the face of the very problems around us, our readings speak directly today. Our Acts reading follows on from Acts 2.1-13 which is always read at Pentecost. After these opening verses, Peter stands up to explain it all - in the first of four speeches Peter makes in Acts.

Peter's speech is a response to what has happened to the followers of Jesus in the opening days of the early Christian community's existence. In fact, the whole of Chapter 2 is the unveiling of the fulfilment of a prophecy Jesus uttered just before he ascended: 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So today, 'You will be my witnesses in Curbridge, Minster Lovell, Hailey, Witney, West Yorkshire, Poland, and wherever else you join us from today!'

Here, Peter explains God's purpose for the world in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He quotes Psalm 16 to make a connection between David's words in the Psalm and the raising of Jesus from the dead.

Just in case listeners miss the point, Peter explains that although David died, he knew God would keep the promise of one day placing one of his descendants upon the throne, and so Peter points to the resurrection of a messiah. And the passage ends with another scriptural quote from Psalm 110 - a ringing announcement that God has made Jesus "Lord" and "Messiah".

We'll come back to those titles in a bit, as those of you who are familiar with the lectionary will know. Because every year on the 2nd Sunday of Easter we have the same reading - our Gospel passage from John 20.

Each time we hear how Jesus, on the evening of the resurrection, appeared to all the disciples except Thomas and showed them his pierced hands and side. The simple story then goes: Thomas insisted he could not believe unless he saw for himself - which did happen a week later. People then tend to cluck 'Poor Doubting Thomas': he just couldn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus without proof.

To do so conveniently forgets that the other disciples couldn't believe without proof either. They just got theirs a week earlier! They are huddled behind locked doors (like most of us). Their joy only began when they saw with their *own* eyes (John 20.20b). And Mary Magdalene is no paragon of faith: she's been weeping in the garden because she hasn't seen Jesus. Today's story isn't about a singular doubting Thomas, but a story of a whole gang of doubters.

But doubt about the resurrected Jesus isn't the most pernicious disbelief in John's version of events. What seems to be even more dangerous is the lack of faith in one another's witness that is displayed throughout these events.

Communal distrust pervades this account like a noxious virus. The disciples don't believe Mary; Thomas doesn't believe the disciples. All of them think the reporter is either a bald-faced liar or a raving lunatic, or both.

It reminds me of CS Lewis who was famous for his saying known as the Trilemma, that Jesus was 'Lunatic, Liar or Lord', sometimes known as the 'Mad, Bad or God' argument. His point was that what we see in Jesus forces us to make a decision about him. As Lewis wrote, 'You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a Demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising

Sunday, 19 April 2020

nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

I wonder if you are able to look at Jesus and say, 'My Lord and my God'? as he miraculously comes through our closed doors and gives us the gift of Peace.

This gift of peace is the gift of Christ's very self. I recall being taught as a youngster when you see the host raised before us at the Eucharist - or at the Benediction in a few minutes - to respond with the words 'My Lord and my God.' Because here Christ offers peace to our very souls. This is the grace St Paul desired for believers when he wrote 'The Peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds.'

We are each invited by God into a journey of faith and trust joining with what is the climax of the whole of John's Gospel: 'My Lord and my God' - even though we can't touch Christ's wounds. But we are also the same people who can distrust one another as easily and quickly as those first disciples. In the face of our anxieties and fears - our cynicism and scepticism can be consuming.

I don't know about you, but the more I think about it, the more I believe it is a dance of doubt and faith. Sometimes the presence of Jesus is pretty obvious: sometimes it is painfully, chillingly absent. Bishop Kallistos Ware once wrote, 'True faith is a constant doubt, God is incomparably greater than all our preconceptions; our mental concepts are idols that need to be shattered. So as to be fully alive, our faith needs continually to die.'

Maybe that metaphor of Crum's opening hymn is even more appropriate than I'd thought. Perhaps we are all part of a gang of doubters, who wrestle still with 'sins and doubts and fears.' And yet, maybe our only hope is this: in spite of the doubts, the Risen Jesus still comes and stands in our midst, breaking through locked doors - whether physical or spiritual - breathing peace upon us, and offering blessing when we notice Christ's presence.

Sunday, 19 April 2020

Maybe for some of us it is like Siegfried Sassoon's poem, *Faith Unfaithful*:

Mute, with signs I speak:
Blind, by groping seek:
Heed; yet nothing hear:
Feel; find no one near.

Deaf, eclipsed, and dumb,
Through this gloom I come
On the time-path trod
Toward ungranted God.

Carnal, I can claim
Only His known name.
Dying, can but be
One with Him in me.

'Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.'
'My Lord and my God'
Amen.

TC Wright
Easter 2 2020
E-Church