

Easter Monday Homily – Matthew 28:8-15; Witney Benefice

+ In the name of the Father...

‘You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’

Well baby, I've been here before
I've seen this room and I've walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew ya
And I've seen your flag on the marble arch
And love is not a victory march
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

In the last six weeks or so, there has been a lot of talk in my household about alligators. No, we haven't become keen herpetologists – rather, forced to find an alternative to the A-word, we've found ourselves talking about the ‘Easter Solemn Alligators’, for example. There was even a minor crisis when I accidentally started playing the ‘Halligator chorus’ on Spotify. You can imagine our relief when, yesterday morning, we were once again permitted to enjoy the word ‘Alleluia’ in all its glory.

Some will have gone even further than us, burying a piece of paper with the word alleluia on it on Ash Wednesday and disinterring it yesterday as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection. If you're tempted to try this at home next Lent, make sure the box is sealed – there's nothing worse than finding a box full of worms first thing on Easter morning.

To me, Alleluia is a supremely beautiful word, a cry of absolute joy. There is a theory that it is etymologically connected to the practice of ululating, which spread from North Africa – this is a vocalised cry of delight.

But what does this cry of joy mean? When translated, it is usually rendered 'Praise the Lord'. Now, to me, that loses a great deal of the careless beauty of the original word. 'Praise the Lord', while a worthy sentiment, feels more like a pious instruction than an overflowing of love for our creator. There's a bit of a sense of let-down, much as we might feel when listening to today's gospel.

Our gospel reading today starts on a high – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary running to tell the disciples what the angels have said to them, and almost running into the risen Lord. We have that tender and beautiful detail – that they took hold of his feet and worshiped him – the feet which still bore the brutal marks of the nails.

But then we are shown a rather different reaction to the news of the resurrection. The guards under whose watch it happened, waking from their swoon, start a deliberate campaign of face-saving. The priests and elders agree to pay them off, on the condition that they spread a plausible rumour, that the disciples came and stole away Jesus' body.

It can be difficult to know what to do with this detail, which appears only in Matthew's gospel, and not in the other three. Our Easter idyl is punctured and we are brought back down to earth with a bump. Jesus' humiliating death on the cross demonstrated his refusal to be corrupted by the pernicious forces of human power – the forces which lie for their own benefit, and which use money to co-opt others into their deception. And yet, we hear that on the very day of his triumph over death, those forces have crept in once again, altering the good news of the resurrection to suit its own needs. On the face of it, it is rather dispiriting to read of this, and yet also recognisable. Waking up this morning and reading the news of ongoing war, death, disease, corruption,

violence, climate crisis, injustice, and oppression felt to me like a far cry from yesterday's joy and hopefulness.

How, then, do we maintain our Easter Alleluia spirit in the face of this? Not, I believe, by turning our backs to it. The good news of the resurrection is only good news if it is capable of interacting meaningfully with this litany of the world's pain. We cannot just say 'Praise the Lord', while ignoring the pain of the Lord's children. So, what can we do instead?

The key to this, for me, lies once again in that word, Alleluia. Far from being a buried word for Jesus and his disciples, this word would have been on their lips frequently throughout the days of Holy Week. For observant Jews, the Hallel psalms form an important part of every major festival, including Passover. These are Psalms 113-118, which begin and end in Hebrew with the word 'Hallel', or, in English translations, Alleluia. Looking back in Matthew's Gospel to chapter 26, we are told that at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives 'when they had sung the hymn' – this, again, would have been one of these Psalms. 'Alleluia', 'Praise the Lord' was on Jesus' lips as he walked with eyes open to his agony in the garden. The Lord that he praised was the same Lord whom he begged 'Let this cup pass from me.' Those Alleluias were the cry of someone turning to face the world's pain, and saying with supreme trust in God's power, 'Your will be done.'

The Easter message will always be corrupted. The world's pain and the world's corruption will always come to reassert itself in the face of our Easter joy. But that is how it should be, if we are living with our eyes open. Our Alleluias are only meaningful when they proclaim Jesus' triumph over death in the face of evidence to the contrary. When we say 'Alleluia, Praise the Lord' we are saying that, despite sickness and violence and injustice, the Good has triumphed and

death HAS been defeated. When we make Alleluia our song, we proclaim all that God has done for us, from creation to the cross, and from the cross to the empty tomb, and from the tomb to this grey cold Monday in the middle of a deadly pandemic. We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song – a song which calls us to look with open eyes and aching hearts at the world’s pain, and to embody the Good News of the resurrection, bringing God’s love into the forgotten and bleeding corners of the world.

Amen.