

## The Bishop of St Albans

### Matthew 28.1-10 Easter Day, 16.4.17 St Albans Abbey

In today's gospel reading Mary is given three commands.

It would be fascinating to conduct a survey and ask people to guess what those commands might be. You might imagine she would be told 'Be good' or 'Don't sin' or 'Try to be more holy or prayerful'. In fact she is commanded: 'Do not be afraid!'

That *sounds* fine, but how can we not be afraid when we live in a world where whole populations are sometimes paralysed by it? In recent days chemical weapons have been used in Syria to kill innocent civilians, including children and babies. In North Korea, Kim Jong-un is developing and testing nuclear weapons, threatening mass destruction in neighbouring countries. Two days ago Donald Trump unleashed the biggest non-nuclear bomb ever used in peace time. There is much to fear in our fragile world at the moment and there is a need for all Christian people to work for peace and justice, and to do all we can to protect the marginalised and the needy.

But look more closely at the angel's command. It was not 'Don't be afraid because suffering and pain and murder are not real'. The torture and crucifixion of Jesus demonstrated all too powerfully the dreadful reality of evil. Indeed his resurrection body bore the scars of the nails in his hands and wound of the soldier's spear in his side.

The command 'Do not be afraid' only makes sense in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Although there is evil and suffering and pain and murder in this world – and they are all too real and all too near to home – we are not to fear because in Jesus' resurrection such terrible things are no longer the final word. God's love is greater than man's worst evil. Even if we do not see it at the present time, God's redeeming love will overcome all evil.

It is at this point that we are presented with a choice. Are we to live as if there is no meaning, no hope, no purpose in this world, and give into hopelessness, fear and despair? This would be the logical response to the assertion made by Richard Dawkins when he wrote that the universe has 'no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference' (*River out of Eden*) Or are we to live as a resurrection people, convinced that evil and death are not the final word; that we have been created for an eternal destiny, rooted in love, inspired by hope, and therefore, there is nothing ultimately to fear?

The second command in today's gospel, spoken by the angel to the women is: 'Come and see' – 'Come, see the place where he lay'. It's a rather strange command. The two women were not being invited to come and see *something*. Rather they were being invited to discover that there is *nothing* there – or rather *no one* there. There is nothing to see in the dark, dank tomb except the place where the body of Jesus had previously lain. The angel is challenging Mary: 'Dare to look into the darkness of which you are terrified. Dare to enter into the place of death – the tomb – and find that it is now empty. Dare to pause and look inside your very being,

to peer into your deepest inner fears and anxieties and when you do that in the light of the resurrection of Jesus you will, in fact, discover that there is nothing any longer to fear. Perfect love – God’s perfect love – has indeed cast out all fear’.

For centuries this invitation to ‘come and see’ has also been the motivation for Christians to engage in the worlds of science, philosophy, ethics and technology. Be open, be curious, after all, this is God’s world! Belonging to a community of faith which has its roots deep in 2000 years of history, some Christians have pulled back in fear at the many complex and challenging questions that are being thrown up, almost of a daily basis, such as gene therapy or end of life issues. Is it not safer to retreat into the past and hope these questions will go away?

And that brings us to the third command, given both by the angel and by the risen Christ himself: ‘Go and tell’. ‘Go and throw yourselves, body, mind and soul, into all the questions and challenges and issues which make up the world today. There is no area, no subject which falls outside the scope of the resurrection life which has been unleashed in the world.

It is as the disciples go that Matthew tells us: ‘And suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”’

In Matthew’s account of the resurrection the destination is important. It is to Galilee that the disciples must go. Why on earth Galilee? This was the back of beyond, it was ‘up North’, far away from the centres of power and influence around Jerusalem. Yet this was the place where it all began. At the beginning of his ministry the cynics had asked ‘can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ and now the action returns there. This subversive revolution that the resurrection of Jesus has unleashed is not to be controlled by the influential, the powerful or the sophisticated – for the things that really matter in this world we don’t have to look to London or even to Westminster! The power of God is at work here, among us, the ordinary people – and nothing can stop it or control it.

One of the interesting features of the gospels and of the life of the early church is that although it is firmly rooted in the past, it was nevertheless forward looking. Those first Christians longed for and yearned for the coming of the Kingdom of God in their midst, so much so that they poured out their lives in costly love and service to make it come about. For those early believers did not think that the resurrection was just a nice idea that would be comforting as they faced death. The resurrection was not just a doctrine to be believed with their minds, but an invitation to live in a new way.

And that’s why this morning we are renewing our baptismal vows which remind us that we too have been raised from death to life. Just as the Israelites passed through the Red Sea from the bondage of Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land, so in baptism, we have passed from death and have been raised to new life. As St Paul puts it ‘Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6.4).

We will never meet the risen Jesus if we shut ourselves away in fear – fear of what others think, fear of what others might do to us, fear of difficult questions or fear of the future; we will never encounter the resurrection life of Jesus if we want to hold on to it and try to hug it to ourselves. On the contrary, the way we discover more and more of God's resurrection life is by journeying with him and sharing the good news with others in word and deed.

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

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