

SERMON FOR LENT 4 | 22.03.2020

Exodus 2: 1-10; Colossians 3: 12-17; St Luke 2: 41-52



On the front of the weekly magazine the weekly journal, the Tablet, there is a picture of the Pope, standing on the balcony he always uses to bless the crowds who come to visit him in St Peter's Square on Sundays. It is usually packed with thousands of pilgrims. In this picture there isn't a single person there, not one. It seemed to me that was as good a picture as any to symbolize today: all of our churches are in lock-down and we are all in a slight state of shock as so many of the things we take for granted are denied us.

Little by little we are mentally getting to grips with the scale of this pandemic and even though many would have been gathering today for Mother's Day, we all recognise the seriousness of the threat. We simply can't meet like we used to.

But for the Christian churches that knocks the stuffing out of what keeps us together: our worship. So what use are we if we can't meet to pray?

Lots of people are rightly suggesting that we ought to be doing all we can to look after the poor, the lonely and the elderly. Our Christian faith should concentrate on the practical needs of those who are worst hit by the coronavirus – making sure that Pack-Up (the weekly lunch for the street community) can offer a good take-away service and that we get shopping for those who are self-isolating. People here have been working at that all week.

But I want to highlight something that is also ‘the work of the Church’ and that is trying to offer a real sense of hope in the middle of all the very real despair that is floating around at the moment. But where do we get that ‘hope’ from?

In the introduction to the book that several of us are reading for Lent (*Luminaries*, by Rowan Williams) Rowan talks about the technique Jesus used to help people to discover what God was about. He told stories.

Now we all tell stories, and we listen to lots more! And while we are listening to those stories we find ourselves asking – how much of this is true – and what does it say about the person telling the story? So and so always exaggerates or x always has a beef about this or that. Whatever the story is about, it ends up sounding the same as the last one! So Rowan goes on to say that we are often ‘trapped’ by our outlook: a pessimist will gear their story in one direction, an optimist in the other. You almost know that before the story starts!

Rowan then says: *but what the Christian Gospel has to say – if we have ears to here – is that there is something that can enter the apparent deadlock, the stand-off with the stories we tell about ourselves, that will take us to a different conclusion. The something is the presence of the redeeming Christ.*

He then reminds us of the story of the gloomy disciples, walking disconsolately along the Emmaus Road after the Crucifixion. It is only after a conversation with Jesus (not that they knew it was him) that the way they thought about the events of the previous few days changed completely. That is what Jesus had done to their story. What had felt like total loss and defeat was now filled with triumph and with hope. The story of St Paul that follows in *Luminaries* is similar: the man of passion, the sickly, pig headed rabbi whose whole life was turned upside down by an incident on another road, this time the one to Damascus – is the one who would go on to transform the way the Gospel was spread throughout the known world.

Today’s Gospel, chosen for Mothering Sunday has something of the same feeling about it too: Jesus slips away from the huge community caravan that was packing up for home after their pilgrimage in Jerusalem. And what happens? After a whole three days of frantic searching, his parents find him in the university behind the Temple.

All the scholars of the day are there – all the big noises with life times of experience. And there is Jesus; twelve years old or so, teaching them how to revisit their stories, their knowledge of the Scriptures and their general take on life so that the light and the love of God can shine through their academic and rather cynical view of human nature. Life isn't all bad because God is at work, says Jesus.

One of the 'stories' that Christians in our generation can sometimes tell themselves is that we are now just a tiny enclave in a sea of selfish materialists who only care for themselves. The Church is shrinking faster than the supplies of toilet paper on the supermarket shelves! And the only way we can stem that is by working harder and harder to stay together, to be lively churches which will keep the rumour of God alive in our parishes.

And then: and then we are told to shut: *Coronavirus spreads thorough human touch, so stay in your houses – even on Mothering Sunday.* It seems devastating. Today is my 11th anniversary in this parish and I am talking, live, to almost no one! What a failure...

And yet I have rarely seen "the Church" so alive and the community so caring. A neighbour I hadn't spoken to for ages suddenly texted to say: *do you remember me? I used to help with Pack Up and now that I am having to work from home I have time to help again.* From all over there are offers of food, transport and time – and the assumption that the Church is one of the key places to coordinate these things. In the churches themselves the skill of streaming services has grown like topsy. Huge amounts of ingenuity and imagination are emerging.

And what we have found this week is that, through social media, video conferences techniques like Zoom, texts and emails, we can stay in touch with each other. And despite our growing individualism it seems that that is what people want — not just here but in singing opera arias on the balconies in Italy and in the the bingo calling from the top of a garage in a sink estate in Dublin! I don't think we will copy the invitation of one priest who wanted to stick the pictures of his congregation on the ends of the pews to remind him of who they were ... but you get the point: the Church remains a vast, invisible army of people – and it sometimes takes crises like this one to remind us of what God knows; just how many we are.

And if that is the case we have to ask what people are looking for: is it just solidarity and human friendship or is it the one ingredient which is at the heart of what Christianity is about: hope?

90 year old Jurgen Moltmann, the great father of German theology, speaking in Westminster Abbey recently, quoted the philosopher Frederick Holderlin who wrote: *Where there is danger, salvation grows.* By which he meant that it often takes a crisis to force us to go back to what is really important. Lauren Laverne on Desert Island Discs asks the guests – and which one of your eight tracks would you save if all the others were lost? In the same vein Moltmann goes on to say, *if we know that humanity will ultimately survive, we don't need to do anything; all will be well. And if we know that humanity won't survive, we don't do anything; what is the point? But if the future is open to both possibilities, then we get a new flush of energy and we do everything we can to get the best outcome.*

And it all hangs on hope. As St Paul wrote; *and we know that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

This year, this Mothering Sunday, we think of our families and just how important they are to us. I am thinking especially of our younger daughter returning from Brisbane at the end of her honeymoon and of our niece who is in total isolation having been seriously infected with Coronavirus. I don't need to see either of them to know the links that bind our family together.

So it is in this apparently empty Church – or in the empty St Peter's Square; it is our trust in the Jesus who loves us and holds us up – and in our solidarity with one another – that our future lies.

Family – the family of God - rooted in trust and faith ... and hope. *We know that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God. As on the Emmaus Road Jesus is retelling the story that all is hopeless. Closed bars, the saddest stories of disruption and economic ruin – even this awful physical isolation from one another - are not the whole story. Because of Jesus and the hope that he offers, we will come through.*