

SERMON FOR EASTER DAY | 12.04.2020

Acts 10: 34-43; Colossians 3: 1-4; St Matthew 28: 1-10

We think we know the Easter story! In our memory lies a nice mix of stories from St Luke and St John, with a distressed Mary in the garden thinking Jesus to be the gardener, and the two disciples, Peter and John, trying to outrun one another to get to the tomb first. The stone has been rolled away, the sun is shining...

And then we read the story in St Matthew's Gospel and it seems like we are reading it for the first time! Here the stone is still in place; there is an earthquake to match the one at the time of the crucifixion when all the graves opened. And then a superhero from heaven appears and it is he who roils the stone away – before sitting on top of it! The story differs too in that there are two Marys not one.

As in so many things, we need these contrasts and alternative perspectives. The four Gospel writers had different things to say to us and the fact that Matthew's version of the Resurrection is less well known will hopefully make us sit and ask just what he wanted to share with us.

But today I want to focus on those earthquakes! If you remember, in the St Matthew's version of the Passion story, the sky goes black, the huge curtain in the Temple splits from top to bottom and the graves of leading Jewish leaders open up - after an earthquake strong enough to split the rocks in two. In the Resurrection story the massive earthquake is the introduction to the appearance of a dazzling angel who, apparently effortlessly, is able to roll back the huge stone that blocked the entrance to Jesus' burial site. Matthew is trying to tell us something here...

And his message is that the death and resurrection of Jesus was not just a bad hair day for Jerusalem, sometime about 30ad, it was (if you will excuse the pun) the earth-shattering event for all of humanity – at any point in our history. And perhaps that is why it is most appropriate to have Matthew's telling of the story in 2020. Like me, I guess you have heard enough of the word 'unprecedented' in relation to Coronavirus but the fact that 2000 died on Good Friday in the US alone, that half the world's population are now not working and that 3 billion people have no running water and so can't wash their hands in the time it takes to say the Lord's Prayer, tells us we too are coping with an earthquake of mind-boggling proportions.

Earthquakes are not just destructive, they induce panic: you don't know where to run for safety. And then they stop and there is an eery silence. Those who have survived them find themselves surveying the damage, working out what is still standing and what has gone for ever.

Even before we have hit the peak of this pandemic we are surveying the damage: we can't go out, doctors are dying as they treat patients because of the lack of PPE (a term we didn't even know about 2 months ago), TV broadcasts are relying on presenters working from home, our schools and colleges are shut, all entertainment is closed, the elderly are separated from their families and other support networks, millions of people are in danger of losing their jobs and their businesses at a level we had not thought possible in peacetime – and even our churches have to be closed. It is the experience of the disciples the day after Good Friday writ very large.

And the Dutch want us to look at doughnuts!

Well not literally, but it is the name they have given to a kind of economic model for how we might find some Easter shoots after the earthquake.

Their thinking starts with a question: is our endless search for a growing economy and an ever-expanding GDP actually a sign of economic health? The fact is that the global GDP is ten times bigger than it was 70 years ago and while that has brought increased prosperity to billions of people, it has also been incredibly divisive – and wasteful. We are using up natural resources at a completely unsustainable rate, 13% of the world's population are obese while 2.7 billion don't have access to modern cooking equipment leading to the use of fuels which cause massive amount of greenhouse gases.

And the doughnut model tries to explore how it might be possible to this opportunity to see how the two major problems facing humanity – poverty and climate change – can also be the spur to addressing the imbalances in gender equality, jobs, affordable housing and education.

When almost everything has been taken away from us, can we use this time to create policies which make our society environmentally safe and socially just?

St Matthew is right though: it takes something overwhelmingly dramatic and earth-shattering to force us out of our dream-like complacency. We can't have had anything more challenging than Coronavirus: so what are we going to do now?

The danger is that we just grin and bear the deprivations with as much grace as we can, and heave a mighty sigh of relief when the rules are relaxed and we can begin to go back to 'normal'.

But I hope we will not be like that. Like Martin Luther King in that great speech in Memphis in August 1963 we too have new eyes. *We have a dream, he said, we have seen the promised land...*

Amid the chaos of the lock-down we have felt at first hand the needs of elderly neighbours in a new way, we have shared the experience of so many who are always cooped up in their our homes, we have noticed with a new clarity all the people that we used to take for granted – and we have also seen what we can do without.

So Easter is not the time to say *Phew, thank goodness that is all over. Passiontide and Easter need to work together. Unless we have died with him, we cannot be raised with him* St Paul teaches us. All of us groan when we hear of people who have undergone a major operation for cancer after a life time of smoking, only to hear that that the first thing they did afterwards was to reach for another packet of cigarettes. Have they learnt nothing?

We have, as Christians, two thousand years of experience in seeing how Easter gives us a new opportunity to review the crisis we have reached by our selfishness, and to start again. Oxford economist, Kate Raworth said recently: *I think it's time to choose a higher ambition because humanity's 21st century challenge is clear – to meet the needs of all people, within the limitations of this extraordinary, living planet so that we and the rest of nature can thrive. That's the dream.*

If the Coronavirus has been our Lenten earthquake, now is the time for us to respond to St Paul's familiar call: *Awake O sleeper, arise from the dead: and Christ will give you light.* Sadly we have needed an earthquake so that the stone of our old ways could be rolled away. Now is the time to start travelling into a new landscape, the Galilee of the Gospel, to work for the changes our planet needs. Earthquakes destroy so much; let's not waste the message of this one.