



Diocese of Bristol

Easter Day 2020

Sermon from Bishop Viv

Matthew tells us that Easter is deeply disturbing. For him that is the whole point as the world turns upside down.

Time is reconfigured: the two Mary's come on the first day of new time, of a new creation.

The earth breaks open and heaves dramatically

A heavenly being, an angel, too bright to look at, effortlessly rolls the stone away and, delightfully ordinary, sits down on it

The guards posted to ensure that nothing would happen to the dead body of Jesus were so shaken they became like dead men.

And Jesus is alive.

Over and again, and entirely understandably, the emotional response is of fear.

The guards shook with it.

The angel expected it 'do not be afraid' are the words to the two Mary's.

And the first words of the risen Jesus are 'Do not be afraid'.

So those telling of the extraordinary events in the earliest days of the church still remembered that fear which gripped them, despite the joy which followed.

We are living in deeply disturbed and disturbing times.

Diocesan Office, First Floor, Hillside House, 1500 Parkway North, Stoke Gifford, Bristol BS34 8YU

0117 906 0100 | www.bristol.anglican.org |  THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

The Bristol Diocesan Board of Finance Limited | Reg. in England: Charity 248502, Company 156243

Time before and time after Covid 19 will come to be seen as profoundly different.

Our systems for trading, our ways of relating, are broken.

We have lost so much that is familiar. We are isolated from those we love. We are afraid for those we love, for the future, for ourselves.

We are hearing of those who are ill, those who have died. And we are afraid.

Chris Dobson took the photograph on this Easter card when he and Archdeacon Neil travelled to our partner dioceses in Uganda for the enthronement of Archbishop Stephen in March.

We view the scene from the darkness of the cave outwards. We look towards the light. It is as if we are sat where Jesus lay, and we are looking out into something profoundly different.

Which was, after all, how it was for the first followers of Jesus. By the end of today's gospel Mary of Magdala and 'the other Mary' (sadly we know no more) do understand. But the disciples have no idea. And the gospel accounts tell us it took a while firstly for the followers to be told, then to understand, then to believe.

Some were in the wrong place to find out. Some were in the wrong frame of mind to understand. Some were looking for the wrong evidence to buttress their belief. They stay in the dark for a good while.

In the photograph we look out from deep darkness towards the light, and to a figure sitting on a rock. We are told in the gospel that the women left the tomb quickly with fear and joy. They were sent by the angel to tell the disciples that Jesus is raised and on the way Jesus encounters them and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him, their relationship with him utterly transformed. Immediately they were given a task, and the task overrode their fear.

We are in the dark about how the future will be, and when. Yet we have tasks to do.

Over the last few days followers of Jesus, alongside so many others, have done extraordinary things, creating networks of care, reaching out to those most vulnerable, volunteering to offer help in the NHS. Though you have been held apart, distanced physically, you have created

new ways of gathering together in Spirit as the body of Christ. Despite living with fear and deep uncertainty yourselves, have disturbed the darkness with the light of Christ.

Thirty years ago I joined the parishioners of an Anglican parish in downtown Philadelphia for Holy Week and Easter. The wider community had been impoverished by the impact of industrial decline and by the threat of HIVAIDs. The parish church had little financial resource; it was dependent on the partnership of its richer neighbour. The church building was in need of repair.

The service of Tenebrae on Good Friday evening marked out in ceremony and silence the profound darkness of death and the fear resonating through the community in that neighbourhood. On Holy Saturday we waited, we did nothing, and then a few of us gathered for the vigil, the priest and her curate, some few from the business community and the mother church, more from the tenements down the road.

The music was offered by local jazz pianists who brought their newly fostered baby, a child born with HIV who was already much loved by the parishioners. Together we processed the light of Christ into the dark of that great barn of a church where, on Easter day as on almost every day, a thousand hungry people from the local community would be fed. That Easter, surrounded by fear of poverty and disease, I experienced the sight of Jesus' diverse community proclaiming resurrection and daring to disturb despondency, daring to challenge despair,

And that is what the church through the centuries has done. As Dean of York I oversaw the restoration of the largest Medieval stained glass window in Europe. It is the most extraordinary work of art, technically but also theologically.

John Thornton, the Coventrian who designed it, and painted much of it, set out to tell the story of our salvation by illustrating the early chapters of Genesis and Revelation. The figures are probably painted from life, warts and all. There are plenty of warts. There is humour in very unflattering cameo portraits, particularly of clergy, and in a small boy who watches the unfolding story from the margins of the panels.

Above all there is great drama, not least in the apocalyptic battles of the end times, with their fiery angels white as snow and scary dragons and multiplying pestilences.

This window was created in the early 15th century as plague stalked the country. It was a lay person's affirmation of his faith, of the companionship he felt of angels and archangels, and of the protection of the risen, victorious and exalted Christ who, depicted at the very top of his window, gathers the whole astounding creation and salvation story to himself as peace and justice are established, tears are wiped away and pain is ended.

At almost the same plague-ridden time, the woman we know as Mother Julian isolated herself in a cell next to her parish church in Norwich and received a profound experience of the love of God. She contemplated the death of Christ on the cross, and found herself held in his presence and assured by the words of the risen Christ.

'Thou shalt not be overcome', was said full clearly and full mightily, for assuredness and comfort against all tribulations that may come. He said not: 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted'; but He said: 'Thou shalt not be overcome'. God willeth that we take heed to these words, and that we be ever strong in sure trust, in weal and woe. For He loveth and enjoyeth us, and so willeth He that we love and enjoy Him and mightily trust in Him; and all shall be well. He said not 'You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work weary, you shall not be discomforted'. But He said: 'You shall not be overcome'.

Wherever you are this Easter in our world which is, in so many ways, turned upside down, may you know Christ's love and enjoyment of you in life, through death, and in the world to come.

And when you are tempest-tossed and discomforted, when you are deeply disturbed and frightened, I pray that, through the strength of the risen Christ, you will not be overcome.