

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Back in 2007 or 8 I was with a group from Croydon in Central Zimbabwe and there was some doubt about whether we should go. The reason being that, there was a famine going on. There were great political ructions. The whole place was unstable, and we knew that the people who would be hosting us would have little food, little money, and little water.

And I contacted the Bishop and said 'should we pull out of this trip?' and he said 'visit us when things are rough and we know you love us. Wwait till it's all safe and we'll think you pick your times', words to that effect. So we went.

There were four pumps pumping water into the city of Gueru, the capital of the midlands province. Three of them had broken down and they were operating on one and just before we got out there that one broke, so we were having to source water from wells. While we were out there we had trouble with the secret police. We were hounded with their media, and with politicians. So as we read the scriptures, in that context, we had to imagine ourselves into the place of the people who were hosting us; what their lived experience was, and we found that the routines, and the customs, and the familiarities of home, somehow had to be reinterpreted. It looked different. The scriptures read differently, when you're in a place where everything around you is challenged.

The Archbishop of Sudan, Ezekiel Condo, laughed the way Ezekiel does when I said to him, on a Skype conversation recently, that our diaries have all gone to pot, because that's the norm for him and his people. When you read about people being hunted, when you read in the psalms for example or in some of the prophets, about the precariousness of life, the fragility of our mortality, and we can ignore it to some extent in a life, a world that runs by routine and is dependable, but when you're reading that with people for whom tomorrow is a gift, because it might not come, then you read it differently. An I've suggested many times to the clergy over the last few months that this COVID pandemic where we have been locked out of what is familiar; if you want to use a different biblical metaphor, we've been exiled from home, actually also affords us the opportunity to re-inhabit the scriptures to read them differently; to live them differently, because we're having a glimpse of the experience of most human beings on this planet, and certainly most Christians on this planet, who hope that tomorrow comes but can't guarantee it.

And that's an opportunity we must not let pass. Some probably three years ago now I was at a bishop's leadership seminar over two or three days at the University of Cambridge; not sure how effective it was but it was a good jolly anyway! At lunch we'd been doing some work one day on teams and team leadership, and the guy who led it, who's not a Christian, was in front of me in the queue for lunch so I said to him 'how does this compare with what you usually have, CEOs and chairmen of multinational companies and big hitters in industry and business, and then you get a bunch of bishops?' and without hesitation he said this: 'There are two things they won't talk about: death and failure and I said 'Ah, that's interesting, because that's where we start.'

That's where we start.

The fundamental recognition for human freedom is the recognition of our mortality. It's something that when we read Paul's letter to the Romans we can now read differently because of the experiences we've had over the last few months. This wasn't a nice bit of theology written to people who were stable and for whom everything was nice. It was written to people who were facing persecution. Indeed Paul - he wrote it from prison - he would end up being put to death on account of his faith. So when he's talking about mortality he's not just doing a bit of theologising. He's talking to people for whom this may be today's reality, tomorrow's reality, and in some ways our culture in

the West has tried to escape from some of these realities, pretending somehow that we're immortal or that bad things happen to other people, but Paul writes to these Christians in Rome and says to them, but if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness.

If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his spirit that dwells in you.

And it's part of a bigger argument but what Paul is saying is this: death is all around us; mortality is the fundamental reality of human beings. I hate to quote a Nazi like Martin Heidegger, but he did use a good phrase, which is that human beings are beings towards death, and we have to cope with our mortality in order to be free to live, and as Christians we say well we now live every day in the light of the God who raised Christ from the dead.

As German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg put it: the resurrectionist proleptic invasion of the end times in the present, and now we live in the light of that.

It's the God who raised Christ from the dead who fires us to live not just comfortable lives but lives that cope with the realities of the world in which we live; whatever they may be: for the Romans facing persecution; for Paul himself, soon to be put to death.

I've told you before about the radio interview on Radio 2 where I was asked 'So what happens when you die?' and I said 'I don't care', and the presenter said 'Well given your job (I was Bishop of Croydon) don't you think you should?' And I said 'Well no actually. It's very simple. Christian hope is rooted in the person of God who raised Christ from the dead, not in the working out of a formula that makes my life comfortable or convenient.'

That is where Christian hope and Christian faith are rooted. If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you; he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies, also through his spirit that dwells in you.

But we learn from the gospel something else that is apposite to the times in which we live, and we recalibrate our thinking and our experience of God, and one another, what it is to be the church, in the world, for the sake of the world.

What we've discovered - this is why I can preach in three places at the same time - it's not because when I was made a Bishop I was given super talents - but it's because on two of them it's by video in Zoom or live stream broadcasting. Now several months ago we would have said it's not real. Perhaps it's an add-on to the rest of what we do, but we've discovered over the last few months that there are whole communities out there who have heard the word of the Lord and want to hear the word of the Lord, as we would put it, but not necessarily through coming through the door, at this stage.

And the call to the church again snapped out of the familiar exiled from home, is to become entrepreneurial in a way that I have to say cathedrals usually have to be. That is that we have to become versatile, not living with our caution and our prejudices or saying 'Well I don't like digital', but to say 'How do we now reach the world? How do we allow the seed to fall on all sorts of ground?'

You know the image of the sower, that Jesus uses in the parable, is not of someone with a Western economic mindset, going along saying 'Right I've got to get 100 growth out of every seed', so you measure them all out, and you plant it, and you water you make sure everyone grows. They went along with a basket on their arm and they just chucked it out all over the place, on the basis that

some of it will take root; some of it might not; the weather might change and that'll help things; maybe the wind will blow and it'll blow away.

Maybe someone will get a seed trapped under their sandal when they walk in the places they shouldn't be. It'll end up getting planted somewhere where it has grown.

In other words, the profligate, extravagant, generosity, of just chucking it out there, and seeing what takes root, is the model that we inherit from the scriptures and one that we have got to become better at as church. Not being sniffy about the things or the methods we don't like, but actually becoming experimental, as we've had to become in the last few months.

It's remarkable how quickly people adapt when they have to, in ways that they would never have done if it was left to choice.

And we face some big challenges. We face some big choices. We always have. So there's nothing to be afraid of. You can't argue with reality. But we do follow a Jesus who called his friends to live with that insecurity; to be faithful, outside of the routine and the familiar. To thrive in exile, not just to survive. And rooted in our understanding of our mortality, to trust in the God who raised Christ from the dead and therefore gives life to us.

I could go on at length. I probably already have, but I won't. But I want to leave those two things with us, either here in the cathedral, or watching online, that we have an opportunity to re-inhabit the scriptures, to rethink who and what we are as Christian communities. To recover our sense of mortality and therefore of resurrection hope, and to lose our fear of chucking the seed out and seeing what happens.

May God bless you and us as a church in all that lies ahead. It's not going to be boring. Amen.