

“Christians: where is your hope?”

The opening words of a sermon that was preached seventeen hundred years ago by Hilary of Poitiers, on Psalm 118. “Christians: where is your hope?”

This Easter is being treated by some as the Christmas that they never had, even down, I gather, to tinsel and turkey in some cases. With the arrival of the vaccines, and the drop in infections, there's a sense that we're beginning to break free from this plague. Optimism is in the air. Easter has become something more than a bank holiday with cold weather. It has an additional, symbolic, meaning for us as a nation, after the challenging and heart-breaking year that we have had.

Our Christmas trees that you see here - the two twined together in a cross - reflect that connection, covered with flowers. Christmas and Easter, joined together almost like the sap rising again after a long, hard winter.

We will come out of this. But we can't be sure when.

Over the last year we have felt numb at the loss, and the very soul of the nation has been under the spotlight, exposing both extraordinary generosity, and kindness, and an underbelly of injustice, and warped versions of reality.

We have had a level of disruption that will take us years to recover, and we will. But life might well be different.

Our Gospel reading for Easter Day tells us about a very small community that has been completely disrupted. They thought life was going in one direction, and suddenly it all goes wrong: it stops, dead.

It loses meaning. Silenced. Shut down.

Those faithful women, who bravely come to complete the burial rites that they didn't have time for previously, come with the thoughts only that death is death.

Except just when they thought the story had closed, it had only just begun.

There was no script anywhere for their experience: it was not normal. It was both terrifying, and amazing.

He has been raised. He is *not* here. He is *not* in the place of the dead. What kind of absurd speech is this?

It turns out that there is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

The crack was in death itself and Jesus got in, or rather he got out. He has been raised. He is not here.

Scholars will argue about whether Mark's gospel actually ended at this point or not; the reality is that something so unusual, so different, so radical happened. It was, and is, a mystery; a mystery in the sense that it was too big to be contained.

So what does it mean? It means that Jesus is alive and at large in the world. Walter Brueggemann, the scholar, talks about the 'threat of life', because the resurrection poses questions of every deathly narrative. It means that death, and all its fear-filled variants, are not the last word. It means that our meaning, as human beings, is linked to the life of Jesus. It means that when we look at the world, through the eyes of Jesus, we say: it doesn't have to be like this; we're better than this; we have a higher vocation.

It means that we are now the story, charged with meaning and hope.

Bishop Nick observed on Thursday that optimism assumes that things will get better. Hope draws us through the challenge of the now to create God's new normal. Hope, Saint Augustine said, makes us Christians, for Christ is our living hope.

As we slowly start to emerge from the last year like people who have been living underground, coming out into the daylight, blinking at the strength of the light, we know that all of us have been touched in some way by this COVID legacy. Grief, weariness, exhaustion, loneliness, even anger. Physical, emotional, mental health consequences. Some of us may even find being in a place with others pretty challenging. We are the walking wounded. Remember the world has not been in the place that we're in now for generations. As we emerge there will be a continuity with what has been as well as a discontinuity. Just as we have adapted and changed during the crisis, so we will be adapting, and changing, to how life will become. And it will be true for everyday life, for workplaces, for city centres, for cathedrals, for churches.

Which takes me back to the first Easter Day: a disrupted community, shocked to discover that he has been raised.

He is not here.

They needed to listen: to listen to each other's stories; to listen to the words of the risen lord. Their witness to the new way of resurrection created small, but significant, communities of possibility. We have begun our journey back from the brink in this season of Easter.

On Thursday Bishop Nick invited us to become cathedrals, and churches, which will be a locus of joy and hope for our communities, not just our congregations, because the Easter risen Christ is for the world, and we are Easter people: call to minister, to a world full of calvaries.

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