

Easter

This is a painful Easter. Our churches are empty.

We have not trodden this way before. This is new and difficult. We have not held our Palm Crosses and carried them home. We have not gathered round the table to break bread and share wine. On Good Friday we could not gather to hear again the message of the cross. On Saturday there was no buzz of expectation as the church was decorated and made ready. There are no flowers, no anthem to practice. On Easter Sunday the church is empty, the organ is silent, the pews deserted, the door remains locked.

This is unknown in living memory. We experience bereavement and bewilderment.

You might expect me to offer words of hope at Easter and indeed I can. Fiona and I have been walking around the area as much as allowed for our daily exercise. There are some wonderful stories to tell. I have spoken to more people in the last two weeks than I have met over the past year. Standing at the compulsory two metres (2 yards for those who prefer the Book of Common Prayer – or a fathom for those of us who are sailors) I have enjoyed conversations with people who I would never normally meet.

People have been chatting over the garden fence. On one walk we found a lost lamb so knocked at the house in the next field and met another new neighbour. There are networks of people shopping, collecting prescriptions, looking out for one another. It has taken a time like this to disclose the kindness in people.

Two common themes in conversations has been to think of those who live in heavily built up areas, especially families with children who have nowhere safe to play or walk. Time and time again people have spoken of how lucky we are to live where we live. And then to ask what we will learn from this, will life just go back to normal or will we have learned to value things differently? Will there be things we no longer take for granted? Will we re-evaluate the people most important to our society? Will the kindness continue?

This is a painful Easter. Yes- there are signs of hope and goodness and courage and dedication. But this Easter Sunday we cannot join in worship. This is a loss.

I found myself reading afresh the Easter narrative from St John. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb under cover of darkness. There was no Easter hope for her. This was a woman consumed by grief and overwhelmed by desolation. Her terror and despair were only deepened by finding the tomb deserted. Her assumption was that the body of her friend had been stolen.

This is the first Easter when I have conducted funerals where people cannot care for someone they love. That side of Mary's story is one I am learning to understand a little more. It is a painful reality.

Then come the men, who cannot of course understand what is happening. They do what we usually do when we encounter the unthinkable. They go back to what feels safe. Back to their homes, and, as the story develops, back to their former jobs and lives. Peter goes back to fishing, and the rest go with him.

But Mary stays, weeping in the dawn by the empty tomb. Mary stays with the empty reality.

God, it seems, is about staying with reality. In crib and cross God grasps, painfully grasps, reality. In staying with the reality Mary is the one who meets the risen Lord, made known by the calling of her name.

In those conversations with many people, mostly people who I do not know through church, there has been a question – how will this change us? Behind that question there is a hope, hope that we will change for the better. Whether that happens is, I suppose, up to us. It is a question of whether we are able to stay with this reality, or whether our instinct to get back to normal prevails.

This is a painful Easter, when we encounter in an empty church the emptiness of the tomb, and maybe the emptiness of much that we previously assumed.

The reality is painful, and it is sad, but maybe this Easter we shall encounter God differently. So this Easter can I suggest that we stay with the reality of this emptiness. Because it is those who weep in the dawn who discover what Easter is about.

Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death;
victory is ours through Him who loved us.

(Desmond Tutu)