



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**16 February 2020: Choral Eucharist**

**The Second Sunday before Lent**

**Genesis 1, Romans 8:18–25, Matthew 6:25–end**

**The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean**

Being very partial to poetry, I want to begin on the dark side, if I may – with Mary Oliver’s short-pithy poem, ‘The Uses of Sorrow’:

Someone I loved once gave me  
a box full of darkness  
It took me years to understand  
that this, too, was a gift.

(from *Thirst: Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2007, p. 11).

You see, God creates darkness, not just light. It is all the same to God. And God uses suffering and loss, because God can use any material for grace and glory.

In Daniel Hardy and David Ford’s seminal book *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, the authors ask a teasing question. What is the biggest or most fundamental problem facing the church...? It is the kind of question that you can imagine a buzz group in the Cathedral – right now – or afterwards in coffee.

Now don’t worry, this is not going to collapse into an embarrassing sharing exercise. But if it did, we’d have groups of clergy and laity huddled together hardly pausing: the fundamental problem facing the church is [a] daft sermon ideas like this from the Dean, where we are supposed to natter to people we don’t know; [b] too much chat, and not enough coffee; [c] the bishop, Dean or perhaps the archdeacon; [d] the Archbishop; [e] sexuality, gender, diversity, perhaps; [e] too many conservatives, too many liberals...and so on. The discussion could rumble on for days. And I am sure you would not be short of your own ‘Oscars’ for handing out too. “The nominations for worst diocesan strategy in the southern province are...”.

Hardy and Ford, however, have some something different to say. But the biggest problem facing the church, is, apparently, “coping with the overwhelming abundance of God...”. I think this must be true, and it is arguably truer – if things can be more true in

one place than in another – in the Anglican Church, where we practice understatement with a skill and a passion that reflects our innate English identity.

You see, in our mellow, mild and mature polity, we don't do abundance well. We like our religion to be interesting and rich – but also moderately sedated: ordered, not overly fussy, and not too exuberant. So the idea that we are struggling to cope with God's overwhelming abundance might come as a surprise - possibly a shock?

So if you don't worry, as the gospel enjoins us, what should you expect? I think the answer to this is that God promises more than you can ask or desire. And that God doesn't waste anything either – even the apparently weak, foolish and fallible parts of our lives God seems to find a use for – and makes do with these abundantly. God does not mind what kind of material there is to work with. Just be open to being used. Even in the resurrection – arguably an overwhelming demonstration of God's abundant power over life and death – Jesus returns bearing his scars.

Suffering sometimes has value and sometimes this requires a special wisdom. To see what God can do with the dark (because it is not darkness to God); and also weakness (which of course God loves to use, to shame the wisdom of the wise). What looks like failure to the world is merely an opportunity for God; hairline cracks or gaping holes through which abundant life and grace can pour.

Some years ago, I found myself in the rare environment of something called 'Messy Church' on St. George's day. For those unfamiliar with the term, 'Messy Church' is nothing to do with the wider Anglican Communion, and nor is it a tabloid headline responding to the Bishops' latest *Pastoral Letter* addressing LGBTQ issues. It is worship activity – all age – involving visual aids, movement, reflection and prayer. Quite often it involves adults and children colouring things in using crayons and paper.

It was St. George's day, so we had pictures to colour, and were invited to write our prayers on the back of these pictures. I saved my prayers, written on the back of George, the Dragon, and the Damsel. On the back of St. George I wrote:

Lord, there are many causes to take up. But I am no mercenary for divine hire.  
Give me wisdom to fight for and defend only what is your will. I know you use the weak and foolish things in the world to shame the wise. So give me a heart for justice; give me strength and courage. Dispel my fears. Be my strength and my salvation.

And on the back of the Damsel, I wrote:

Lord, there are too many who need saving. I don't even know where to begin. But you do. So give me the eyes, heart and hands to be your love and life in this world, so I can hold those who need holding, release those who need releasing, and save those who need your saving. Begin Lord, with me.

On the back of the Dragon, I wrote:

Lord, I can't think I have that many enemies. But I bet I do. What's my prayer here, Lord? Well, maybe that they might not hate me; that hearts and minds may be changed. But change me too. Because in their criticism and hatred, there may be some important truths. Truths I need to hear; and a wisdom I need to respectfully fear. Transform us all, Lord.

It is sometimes necessary to make a distinction between real and illusory religion. The maxim of illusory religion runs: "Fear not; trust in God and he will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you".

But real religion is contrary: "Fear not; the things you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you; but they are nothing to be afraid of". (John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 1970). So, I can't promise that everything will be alright. It probably won't. We all worry. But remember the words of Margery Kempe (1373-1438) an English Christian mystic. She claimed God revealed this to her: "More pleasing to me than all your prayers, works and penances is that you would believe I love you".

So, as we reflect on the appointed scriptures for today, think about what has been added to you on your journey so far – who has aided you, and how. Of the light that is already entrusted to you, and for those who will be illuminated by the character and quality of your witness. And God creates the darkness too – and you can find God in that too, and joy as well.

Matthew 6:34 is sometimes known as 'The Pessimists' Prayer' – "do not worry about tomorrow, it will have enough to worry about. Each day has enough trouble of its own". This is true! But remember, as Jesus and Paul remind us, God will provide. God's grace is sufficient. God who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds will not let you fall. Do not be afraid, because not much can come of your fears.

There is a story about a Rabbi who was asked to comment on the book of Genesis. The Rabbi paused, and noted that God had taken six days to make the heavens, the earth, and

all living creatures. After each act of creation, whether it was the light, land, oceans, plants, or any of the animals, God had pronounced them to be good. But on the sixth day, after God had created man and woman, the pronouncement of 'good' from God is conspicuously withheld.

The Rabbi cautioned his audience against concluding that humanity is not good. Instead, the Rabbi noted that the term 'good' is actually a misleading translation of the original Hebrew word, *tov*. *Tov* simply means 'complete', 'finished' or 'sufficient'. And to complete his commentary, the Rabbi added, you have to remember that humanity is not *tov*; we are still work in progress - incomplete. So, commit your life to God – who completes what is lacking, and will fill our gaps, cracks and weaknesses with abundant, resilient grace.

This isn't to minimise the fact that sometimes bad things happen to good people. I am not encouraging denial or a lack of authenticity. But I am convinced that we will be better able to hold on to hope if we can develop some sense of perspective. Eugene Peterson writes: "Exile always forces a decision: will I focus my attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for myself? Or will I focus my energies on how I can live at my best in this place I find myself?"

That is what hope looks like. And we live in a world in need of hope. And that is what we have to offer. Being church and having hope go together; and it is the Spirit's work to set our hearts ablaze with a hope worth sharing with a hope-hungry world. This will involve both words and deeds.

Augustine of Hippo writes, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are". So the hope we have about how things could be becomes a resource for inspiring the anger and the courage needed to do something about injustice within our world. So, despite our sufferings and worries, remember God dwells in light and dark, loves you, me and us all with one equal, brilliant, blinding loving gaze. God is love. Amen.