



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

19 April 2020: Matins Sermon

The First Sunday after Easter

Exodus 14:10–end; 15:20–21; Acts 2:14a, 22–32; John 20:19–end

Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

'Dark Places'

Although we had a really dramatic storm here in the north, in the early hours of Easter Eve, so that the skies cracked open and the earth shook, I'm guessing that most of us didn't have the opportunity to dust down our football rattles, whistles, handbells, horns and kazoos for that wonderful moment in the Easter Vigil; the moment when we mark Christ's resurrection from the tomb, his rolling back the stone, rending the gates of hell, breaking open the graves, bringing the dead to live, by a reverberating cacophony of ear shattering sound, as we rend the air with wild, anarchic, rejoicing: Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Before this, we would have listened carefully, patiently and with growing anticipation, to what our Precentor, Grant Bayliss, in his national all-night vigil, called 'Rumours of Hope'; to the rumblings of God's works and ways, as they are made known to us in what we usually refer to as the 'history of salvation'. The readings stretch from Genesis to the Gospel of the Resurrection, taking in the rumblings and rumours of hope, the events and words which have sounded God's love and providence across the ages. The early Christian theologian, Gregory of Nazianzen called them earthquakes or 'shakings'; the moments when things shift; when everything is changed; when the old is superseded by the new; as God acts to address the consequences of our sin with never failing love.

'Shakings' is a good word, I think. For these events are ones that turn things upside down, reconfigure and transform them. Nothing is ever the same again.

Of course, whenever we hear the Scriptures being read, we apply what we hear to where we are; whether we do it consciously or sub-consciously. Passages in the

Scriptures speak to us in different ways in different circumstances. So, when we read, recite or sing the psalms, we identify with the very human thoughts, feelings and failings of the Psalmist; their hopes, fears and longings; their bewilderment, anger and exasperation; their rejoicing and exultation; even their desire for vengeance. The Psalmist's voice becomes our voice; their words become a mirror for our souls; and identifying with them we are formed by them – and sometimes transformed.

This is also, I think, the effect which the readings at the Easter Vigil are intended to have. They aren't simply an account of God's *former* works and ways to inform our minds; rather we are invited to enter into them, to identify with them, to let them transform our hearts and minds.

This can be disconcerting at the best of times, for we are meant to be unsettled and challenged, shaken and shifted into lives that have been transformed by our listening participation. The Scriptures speak to us where we are.

And where we are this year is a very strange place indeed – and yet, despite this – indeed, perhaps because of this, the readings recounting the history of salvation spoke to me where I am.

Is this what it felt like to be in the Ark, confined in a makeshift home with an extended family and assorted animals, sitting it out while the floods overwhelm the earth and many are killed, waiting for a sign of deliverance?

Is this what it felt like to be in exile in Egypt, captive, unable to return, watching plague after plague wreak destruction, simply to be met with an ever-hardened heart?

Is this what it felt like to be in the belly of the whale; cut off, in the dark, haunted by questions; wondering if it would ever come to an end or whether you would die there?

Is this what it felt like to be cloistered in the womb of the virgin; waiting in its dark confines to emerge into an unknown world and fate?

Is this what it felt like in the upper room, at night, watching, wondering, waiting; sharing food, but aware of the ominous events about to unfold?

Or is this what it felt like to be in the tomb; the suffering accomplished; the work done.

These are all places of confinement, of captivity and constraint; of separation, confusion and waiting. They are all places which in some way cause apprehension or fear; which cannot avoid suffering, but for which suffering is not the final word. For they are all, also, places of shaking; of transition from one life to another: from captivity to freedom, from the old to the new; from darkness to life; from death to re-birth.

I think it is significant that many of these places are ones we continue to identify in the Church and its sacraments: the Church is the ark salvation; the mother whose womb gives birth to new life. It is the place where, in baptism, we are immersed in the waters, cross the red sea, and are buried with Christ to emerge to life and light. The most common episodes painted on the walls of the early Christian catacombs are Noah's Ark; the crossing of the Red Sea; Jonah being swallowed and then spat out by a sea monster; the annunciation; the Last Supper. Without ever depicting the crucifixion, these are all episodes that depict salvation, resurrection; the ways and works of God to save and redeem his people; the shakings of salvation history; the moments when things are irreversibly turned upside down, changed, and a new life and new world emerges – one which is now mediated to us in the life and sacraments of the Church.

But what we must remember, above all, is that these places are not where we were, but where we are. The ark; the crossing of the Red Sea; the three days in the belly of the whale; the incarnation; the Last Supper are all reminders of where we are. They are not simply telling us: this is what happened in the past, but this is what life is like – now. But they also tell us: this is what God does; this is how he acts; this is how he forgives; this is how he never abandons us but is always at work to deliver, save, redeem us. These are the rumours of hope which have grown to a loud rumbling; to the deafening sound of the proclamation of the resurrection at Easter Eve.

For these are rumours that tell us that God meets us where we are: captive and confined; uncertain and fearful; surrounded by suffering and death; in death itself – and that it is here that he gives us endurance and hope. For these are the places where He is to be found and where he meets us; not despite them, but in them, through them, and also, beyond them – in the Promised Land, in Galilee, in the resurrected life. God's promise is not that we will not suffer, but that we will not be overwhelmed.

Come, let us return to the Lord:
For it is he that has torn us, and he will heal us;
He has struck down, and he will bind us up
That we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
His appearing is as sure as the dawn;
He will come like the showers,
Like the spring rains that water the earth
(Hosea 6:1-6)