21 April 2019: Choral Matins
Easter Sunday
Ezekiel 47:1–12, John 2:13–22
The Venerable Martin Gorick, The Archdeacon of Oxford

I’d like to start by saying a Happy and Blessed Easter to you all!

On the day we celebrate Jesus’ victory over evil and death, when we celebrate the power of love in the universe, when we celebrate the sunshine warmth of God’s forgiveness and peace cascading across the centuries we say, Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

I’d also like to thank Steven Grahl, our organists and choir for all they’ve given us throughout Lent, Holy Week and Easter. My fellow clergy, the Vergers, Sidespeople, Cleaners and Flower Arrangers and all who enable the daily worship of God in this place. A happy and blessed Easter to you all!

Holy Week and Easter bring together death and life, pain and joy, despair and hope. The week began with images of Notre Dame in flames. It was shocking to see.

One journalist, Jay Merrick, wring in the Independent was moved to say,

‘To many Christians the collapse of the spire of Notre Dame cathedral had the same shock value as the destruction of the twin towers on 9-11.’

He hadn’t interviewed any Christians it seems, and he didn’t quote from anything any Christian had actually said. But like many commentators he felt he could confidently imagine what Christians might be thinking as they saw that great cathedral burn.

I love Notre Dame, as I love Paris, but the attack on the Twin Towers caused the murder of thousands of people. I doubt if a single Christian, however ardent would equate the two, or see them as equally tragic. As a Christian I was as shocked as anybody to see such a building go up in flames. I mourn the waste and the damage. But I thank God that no one was killed. At the end of the day it is a sacred building, precious yes, but not as much to me as a single human life. To this Christian at least the inferno at Grenfell Tower was far more shocking, let alone the attack of 9-11, or the appalling attacks in Sri Lanka this morning.
Today’s passage from John’s Gospel talks about the great Temple of Jerusalem. Far bigger than Notre Dame, it was a wonder of its time. Its huge walls were covered with white marble, many of its great gates covered with silver or gold, it shone in the sun, and stood out against the deep blue sky as pilgrims glimpsed its splendour from miles away.

And Jesus said, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Was he crazy? Or a terrorist? … ‘But the Temple he talked of was his own body.’

In other words, when you met Jesus, you also found God. Jesus himself was a Temple in that sense, the place you met with God. And people took animals to the Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrifice. But Jesus himself was the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. When God in Christ is nailed to the cross, no animal sacrifice will be needed ever again.

The great Temple in Jerusalem was indeed destroyed, by Emperor Titus in AD 70, and you can still see today some of the huge stone blocks that his men hurled to the floor from the Temple top.

But Jesus had raised a new Temple in three days, just as he said. Not a Temple of wood and stone, that would one day collapse through fire, earthquake or simple neglect. The new Temple was Jesus himself, alive and present in his church. We’ve come to this new Temple this morning, here in Christ Church, and in churches, chapels, caves and mountain tops the world over.

For Jesus said, ‘Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I be amongst them.’ He breathes his body into life when people gather together in his name, as together we become the Body of Christ.

So in our belief as Christians, the church is not a building, it is a gathering of people, meeting together in Christ’s name. God’s Easter people.

And Easter is what we celebrate today.

- We celebrate that death is not the end, for Jesus rose from the dead, and we can too, in him.
- We celebrate that love is stronger than evil, whatever the world seems to say. Hatred and cruelty does its worst with Jesus, and still he rises victorious from the grave and says, Peace be with you!’
- We celebrate that there is nothing we can do, however bad, that needs to cut us off finally from the love of God, if we turn to Jesus, and ask forgiveness in his
name. His sacrifice has paid the price for you and for me. We need simply to believe, and receive the Good News.

And that’s why the journalist got it all wrong, when he said that Christians were as shocked by the burning of a church building, as they were when thousands of people perished in New York.

Jesus didn’t die for a building, however glorious. He died for you. The person sitting next to you is more precious in God’s sight than a thousand cathedrals, however beautiful.

We are God’s Easter people. We have a gospel to proclaim. The joy of the resurrection that starts like a tiny stream, then becomes knee deep, then waist deep until finally it is a mighty river too deep to cross. It’s pictured in Ezekiel’s vision, flowing into the stagnant Dead Sea, making it fresh, full of fish and full of life, with the leaves of trees green for the healing of the nations.

I was at the Dead Sea last week. It is more dry than ever, shrinking by a metre a year. Climate change is burning up our planet. People are suffering. Time is short.

Today, Easter Day, we come together and celebrate Jesus alive amongst us.

Tomorrow we go out to be his Easter people and change the world.

Only in the power of his mighty resurrection.

Amen.