

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 2 May
Theme: Easter 5

Isolation Radio Talk

The present shape of the face of Christ in the world

Good Morning

Listen, a resurrection faith is your source of Hope, even in uncertain and tempestuous times. In our part of Somerset, we live with green valleys, in a paradise of natural beauty. The Holy Land in our Lord's day was different. The terrain was inhospitable; it was no place to linger. Nothing sentimental here; no spring lambs, well trained dogs, green pastures, and sheep in a field. When Jesus described himself as the good shepherd, and when later he challenged Peter to feed his sheep, he was talking about *his* norms of shepherding; not ours. Do *not* be misled.

Shepherds were outcasts in Christ's day; that business of shepherds watching their flock by night on Christmas Eve, may beguile you into missing the point; those who first hear the Good News often travel by the hardest road: Mary of Magdala, Peter, Thomas, Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus, the list is long. I know this is a truth for some of you listening to me today. The shepherd, not the hired hand, knows each of his flock. He defends them, even with his life; if one strays, he leaves the rest and searches till he finds it; to reach fresh pasture he may travel many miles. This picture is far removed from dreams; it does open windows on what the Church was; what it might still be.

For the shape of that Church, you go to its earliest days. I often remind you that Luke tells you, in the Acts of the Apostles, how they met constantly to devote themselves 'to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2.42). Those who follow the risen Christ today, understand and are strengthened. I suspect however, that the Church emerging now, will be different from the Church that has gone before.

With the Church in the years after the first Easter morning, you have much in common; it lived in uncertain times; the future was difficult to read. In parts of your world now there is active persecution; for you, there is the insidious persecution of indifference from a society that has lost its memory of the story; the faithfulness of the Church is being tried.

You must rely now, more and more, on the grace of God. The psalmist asks you to, trust in God's saving power; to make daring appeals to God simply because God is known for *mercy* and *graciousness*; for what God has done in time past. 'For you are great and do wondrous things, you alone are God' (Psalm 86.10). The distinguished American theologian Moltmann, speaks of the inexhaustible mystery of God, who is beyond you as well as closer to you than your own breath. This is what I hope you have heard from me many times in the past difficult year. It is a plea to restore the mystery of God. To look for and find the mystery is to recognise the risen Jesus; he becomes the source of energy sending the Spirit into the varying communities of disciples.

This is not a time for faint hearts. The Brazilian Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff, who gave theological depth and practical help in forming the 'basic communities' of the Church of South America, urges Christians, to enquire reverently into God's character and way of working in creation. Then you will begin to understand; the Easter faith draws you into the life of God. You ask what that means? The question is about the present shape of the face of Christ in the world.

Reluctance to grasp the issues of 'being Church', leads to that feeling of being pushed to the edge; banned from the public square. Nowhere is that sense caught so clearly, than in the sound bite uttered those years ago in 10 Downing Street; 'We do not do God'. A sense of failure is evident when the worship of the Church fails to inspire the body, and mind, and spirit, of the great majority of people in our nation; nowhere is it more evident than in that difficulty you have of speaking of your faith; of bringing to the young that sense of awe and wonder and sacredness of existence.

The temptation and the danger is to retreat inside the walls; walls of correctness and absolutes; walls within which the world of the 'Holy' is more and more separated from the world of reality. The Church is a privileged agent of God's hope; it must find ways to include God in all that has happened in the past year; how to give reassurance to those who suffer; how to heal spiritual wounds; how to understand where God is in a Coronavirus world? And don't fooled into thinking nowhere and that we live in a deterministic world, as some would have you believe. We don't, but that thought, is for another day.

What then to celebrate now? How do you celebrate in a changed society that is bothered and bewildered because of what is happening. Put more starkly the Church must practice 'community'; it will do it, in a way that demonstrates *all* are welcome; not just those of whom it approves. This will raise theological issues about identity; about what words and whose voice speak to our society today; its homes, its schools, its hospitals, its politics, its industry, its prisons, its shopping centres. The relationships between your inner world of thought, feeling and faith, needs a visible cloak; people should feel safe in their exploration of what matters most to them.

It is the task of every Christian to address the tension between what is done that is satisfying to you; and listening carefully and lovingly to others who walk a different path. The Spirit of the risen Christ is just as active there. If the Church fails to refresh the inner spaces of humankind then, perhaps mercifully, it has no future. I believe it *has* a glorious future, whenever you engage honestly with the society emerging in this first quarter of the 21st century. The Church nurtures an inheritance of word and liturgy and place. You take the learnt wisdom of your past lovingly into the future; you must not speak only to yourselves; always care for those who have little knowledge of the presence of God in word and sacrament.

It is no easy task. Be encouraged; it is Christ, not you, not me, who is the keeper of the door of the kingdom. The Church that claims to be the doorkeeper has within it the seeds of its own end. Remember Christ's promise to his disciples: 'I am with you always; to the end of the age' (Matthew 28.20).

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray to the one God, Creator, Word and Spirit,
that our lives may bear witness to our hope.

God, may your divine blessing be upon each one of us
as we go out into the world.

May the light of Christ shine from within us
that we may be a blessing to the world.

And may the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit
guide and protect us,

our families and friends

now and forever.

Amen.