

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 29th March 2020 – Passion Sunday

Ezekiel 37.1-14; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

Today, Passion Sunday, marks the approach of the Church's celebrations of Holy Week and Easter; celebrations which encompass the very core events of the Christian faith. Yet this year our celebrations already feel very different and strange, as we find ourselves effectively locked out of our parish church. We should not resist this new strangeness, but be open to what God has in store to teach us during this time. Indeed, for that reason we should do our best to embrace it.

For the Disciples and even perhaps Jesus himself, all those events were indeed very strange; unexpected, frightening and tragic, but ultimately joyful, amazing and full of new life. In our own walk of faith with God, as we learn more and more how to trust him for what lies ahead, we need again to look out for those signs of new life that even now God is working on. Moreover, we do know now many things that the Disciples did not know at the time, that God's love would indeed win through in many life changing ways.

If the effects of the Coronavirus on our Church are upsetting to think about, these are as nothing compared to the struggle that is growing in earnest this weekend, to sustain our nation's health services, and to care for the sick and the isolated and the lonely and those in financial crisis. There are some amongst us who are already very much part of that health service struggle. So our communities need our care and our loyalty; our leaders need our respect and our prayers for wisdom; and those in front line services need our support and our prayers for their safety. As Christians it should not be difficult to put the needs of others first at this time, even though as human beings that is often more difficult than we care to admit.

Our readings for today all speak of new life in various ways. The prophet Ezekiel speaks to a nation without hope, giving them the surprising news that God had not actually lost faith in them. The apostle Paul reassures new churches about the new life that the Spirit of Jesus brings to people who put their faith in him. And in the Gospel of John and to the great surprise of all, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from physical death, as an amazing sign of how far reaching is the new life that his own death will bring to all who accept God's friendship. Within the Coronavirus pandemic, within all its effects on people and communities and nations and the Church, we too can be confident that we will be able to find the new life and love that Jesus offers, even in the dark times which lie ahead.

The last two weeks has been full of growing fears. Fears for the NHS, fears for our prosperity as a nation, fears for family and friends, fears even of dying alone. Indeed perhaps more people did need to become afraid, so that they would begin to respond more appropriately to government instructions. And indeed there are fears for the future of our own Church. At St Mary-le-Tower we are perhaps more bereft than some other churches by being unable to meet for worship, for it is not as if we all nevertheless belong to the

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same neighbourhood. As a church that gathers from all over Ipswich and beyond, we are particularly vulnerable to a situation where gathering is not possible. What will become of us?

For this reason we do need to pay particular attention to keeping the St Mary-le-Tower Community in touch with one another, and we need to be open and innovative and flexible to meet in new ways. The choir community is already beginning to work hard at this, with online singing and with online study groups too. We are going to keep our choir community together and active so that when the social restrictions are relaxed, the choir can resume singing in church with hardly missing a beat. Even choir recruitment is going to continue online. What other ideas are there about how we can be together as a church when gathering is not possible?

Soon also there will be live Sunday communion services streamed from the Vicarage. They can't as yet be streamed from church as the church building is officially closed, and the Bishops of the Church of England wish clergy to give a lead in working from home wherever possible. So we are aiming to celebrate Holy Week as an online church community as far as possible. Some will not be able to be part of this and we need to make sure they are included in other ways. Everyone can play their part in keeping us in touch with one another as a church. Everyone can draw up their own list of those with who they want to be regularly in touch.

We are the Body of Christ at St Mary-le-Tower, no less than when we were meeting together in church. Even though we cannot meet physically for worship at present, it is not the church building that makes us the Body of Christ but the Holy Spirit of God, and the Spirit is still doing this even though we cannot gather together physically. Parish Churches are holy ground because that is where the Body of Christ normally gathers. They become special places not because some Bishop has consecrated it but because the Body of Christ sanctifies it by meeting there. It is we who bless the church in God's grace, rather than the church building blessing us. I wonder how the Body of Christ at St Mary-le-Tower will be a blessing to others at this strange time? What other ground can we hallow?

If St Mary-le-Tower Church is important to you, now is a really vital time to work at growing together. Some of us are perhaps all too used to St Mary-le-Tower just being there whenever we want it to be. But now in this strange time we need to work more intentionally at being Church. This national crisis will pass; the future will open up again; and we will need each other in our journey onwards in the way of the Cross. There will be sorrows as well as joys to share. We need to make sure that we are still together to do all this.

CJ. 29.03.20