

Enthronement Hereford Cathedral Saturday 21st March 2020

Friends can I welcome you to this service of licensing and installation today.

We meet together, small in number, in rather odd circumstances. This is not business as usual but business as unusual. I'm very conscious that a number of you will be listening to this feeling anxious and fearful and I am sorry for those of you who'd love to be here but can't be. I'm also so grateful to all who spent so much time preparing this service as originally configured. These are unsettling times for our church and nation.

We may have had the experience, in the midst of personal difficulties, friends and family sending comforting words and Bible verses. Often, they're printed against a soft graphic of waterfalls, sunsets and beautiful countryside. I've always been grateful that people care enough to pray and offer comfort, but I caught myself thinking "you don't really know what I'm going through". For some, a lack of knowledge of the depths of the struggles we face can make such advice feel slightly patronising.

But bear in mind that our current abnormal for those who wrote the Old and New Testament, from which these words of comfort come, was for them very normal. They lived daily lives of war, plague, scarcity and insecurity. These are the words of those who'd seen family members thrown to the lions for entertainment. All their normal grounds for security had been stripped away, they were daily confronted with their essential powerlessness. This is the context in to which Paul writes his letter to Timothy, some of which we read earlier. The threat of martyrdom was very real. Paul himself is

writing from a prison cell, incarcerated for the temerity of sharing a message of love and hope. Its in times of extremis like his that the mind focusses on the essentials, words that you share with some urgency. What does he say in v.8? *"Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead descended from David, this is my Gospel."*

For those first Christians, that was the faith that lay beneath so many acts of what to us appear rash courage. In the plague that beset Rome in the third century, where over five thousand people a day were dying. Christians were the ones who cared for the sick and buried the dead when everyone else ran for the hills.

Dionysius, writes, *"Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains."*

Similarly, in Pontius's biography of Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, he writes of how the bishop reminded believers to serve not only fellow Christians but also non-Christians during the plague:

"There is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well. . . . Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith."

Clearly, they knew little of the wisdom of self-isolation for the benefit of others! I don't wish to use these quotes as an encouragement to rash behaviour. We know that self-isolation isn't solely about self-protection, it's minimising the spread of this virus to others. However, there was something in their world view that led them to behave utterly differently from their peers.

We, like them, believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Some to whom Paul wrote were eye witnesses of it. To remember, is not to wallow in nostalgia for a better time, or even to keep the rumour of God alive. In the Greek text of Paul's original letter, it is a present imperative meaning to think about and keep in mind constantly. It is to look at all reality through the lens of this earth-shattering, unique event. It is to make the resurrection inform and guide our current behaviour and experience. For those early Christians their hope and certainty of eternal life enabled them to hold lightly, even to life itself, while they put themselves in harms way caring for others.

Jesus raised from the dead is a historic reality that transforms all reality. We Christians believe that death is not the end. It shows us there is a power outside ourselves working for our good. Jesus too died in that faith. As he contemplated his own death, he said to his persecutors, "kill me and on the third day, God will raise me." Christians have always seen the resurrection showing us that evil will never have the last word. Not only that, but the sacrifice of Jesus which reconciles an alienated world to a loving Father is demonstrated as effective through Christ's resurrection. God has indeed broken in to normal life. God is with us always.

Now, we do not have to live our lives in the limitations of our own strength and abilities. Through Christ we can be forgiven and made new. From that rock of security extraordinary things become possible if we receive the risen Christ for ourselves. We enter in to a different domain whose law is

love not well socialised self-interest; whose appeal is to self-sacrifice rather than self-restraint. Whose motivation for selfless behaviour is not public shaming on newspaper front pages but a passionate conviction of the value of all human beings made in the image of God, redeemed by his sacrificial act in Christ and with the potential by the Spirit to become a new creation. This is the centre of our faith, we too easily forget it, distracted by other things apparently more important. Churches can become narrowly parochial places.

One of the disadvantages of living in a house where one's predecessors have lived for hundreds of years is that they glare down at you from portraits on many of the walls. As I have sought inspiration from them I have found that some were not always shining examples of focus on the job in hand as Timothy was encouraged by Paul.

For example, Thomas de Charlton, who was the Bishop here from 1327 – 1343 rather liked holding more than one Ecclesiastical Office at a time. At one stage he held two Archdeaconries, four Canonries and the year after his enthronement he was made Treasurer of England. I imagine he had a fairly full inbox.

Others took quite the opposite approach, not taking their pastoral responsibilities quite as seriously as we might hope. A medieval prelate probably had many distractions. Edmond Lacy for example, was consecrated Bishop at Windsor in the presence of Henry V in 1417, but apparently never found an opportunity to visit the diocese. Something at least four other Bishops of Hereford never managed to do either.

And then there is the distraction of talking endlessly about things that may be important, but are certainly not central. Paul counsels Timothy in v. 14 to warn his congregations "against quarrelling

about words; it is of no value and only ruins those who listen.” My predecessor Hensley Henson agreed when he said, *“I hold strongly that there is too much organised talking in the Church of England.”*

But Paul’s words to us echo powerfully, “No” says Paul to Timothy, “remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead.” We are experiencing in our nation a shaking of our foundations, economy and social structures. We are being reminded of our essential powerlessness. A blob of protein and RNA, so small that its only visible under an electron microscope can stop plane traffic across the world. Paul’s words from an earlier time of anxiety remind us that there is a power beyond ourselves, a deeper reality our hyper connected world has largely forgotten or ignored. We believe that Jesus has risen from the dead and that reality transforms all reality.

As our lives continue in a sort of limbo over the next few weeks there will be stresses, strains and difficulties. We will frequently need wisdom and strength beyond ourselves. But as Christians we know and commend the risen Christ who walks with us, supports us, strengthens us and in whose strength all things become possible, even acts, rash acts, of kindness and love and self-sacrifice.

Paul’s words to another church in Corinth, are perhaps a good place to end. *“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day, for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

We remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead.