

Easter Day 2020

Last week, you might remember, I started by talking about sacraments – and that classic definition of them in the Prayer Book: outward and visible signs of inwards and spiritual graces. Like how a piece of bread that you can see and touch and eat symbolises the Jesus you can't see, feeding your heart and soul. And indeed, more than symbolises: how the bread actually reinforces, sustains, even embodies that greater feeding. The inward and spiritual truth happens through the outward and visible sign.

And you might remember that I said that the Roman soldier standing on the walls of Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday was in his own way a kind of sacrament, or an anti-sacrament. An outward and visible sign of all that had gone with Jerusalem, of a gone-wrongness much deeper than mere military occupation. Jerusalem was occupied by things far worse than Romans: by greed, by fear, by arrogance, by all the legion of dark forces. The soldier was, in himself, just a sign of all that. An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace.

Now think of our present situation, and this virus. That too, my friends, could be one of these strange anti-sacraments. Think of our planet, our race, as a body and it was badly diseased long before coronavirus raised its head. We have infections far worse than CV-19, grim as it is. We were sick through greed, and fear, and arrogance – and in the modern West with our own particular poisons: aimlessness, despair, and consumerism. Coronavirus has knocked us over ... but we were ready to fall. We were already weak and sick within: coronavirus is but the outward and visible sign of a system already overrun by yet more lethal things.

Well, this, friends, is what it means to speak of Jesus bearing the sins of the world. Think of our world as a desperately ill person, poisoned, slumped helpless on the ground. A dead weight of sickness. And think of Jesus as the one who rushes in, and hoists that weight over his shoulders, to bring him to safety. But as Jesus does so, it's as if the sickness passes into him: as if the one who came to save himself succumbed. In Paul's language, as if the one who knew no sin, became sin. That's what we marked on Friday. That all our sickness drained into Him.

And we call it *Good* Friday only because of what we know today, on Easter Sunday. When Jesus drains our sin, when he draws all our sickness into Himself, the greatest mystery of all happens. Sickness touches grace. It touches the beauty and the brilliance of the divine life, and at last it meets that which it cannot infect, it cannot destroy, it cannot kill. It pours itself against it, in all its destructive fury, and it cannot prevail. Jesus is death of death. He is hell's destruction. From this single point in world history, from the tortured body of this man, the great turnaround begins: from this time and place, death shall no more have dominion over them.

And what is the outward and visible sign of that inward and spiritual truth? Twofold: first, an empty tomb. You know that life has won because Jesus' wrecked body is wrecked no longer: it is risen, glorified, it shines like the sun. Death and decay are things of the past now. That's the first great sacrament of resurrection – and the second, I'm afraid, is us: people who are filled with that energy, with that power. In whom all the dark viruses – greed, fear, arrogance, the whole legion of them – are being driven out. It may be swift, it may be slow, it seems at times unbearably slow – but it is sure. Sure and certain. Everything which is not light and love in us, in the world, will be driven out. It has no dominion, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

To which the obvious riposte is to say, well, you're still going to die, aren't you? And you still sin, don't you? I haven't seen many Christians not dying or not sinning recently. You still *look* like a people pretty much under occupation.

And this, incidentally, is not as stupid a response as we are first tempted to dismiss it as. We're so used to acknowledging the many ways in which Christians don't look victorious over sin and death, that we're at risk of becoming comfortable with the fact. The New Testament, by and large, was not so comfortable. There are even parts where it suggests that Christians can't sin, that it's almost an impossibility because of the new life surging within us. Almost in the same breath, it owns, of course, that we *do* but there is a note of staggered bewilderment about it. *This should not be*, is the tone.

How to make sense of this? The great turnaround has begun. It has been unleashed in us. All that is not life and love is being driven out And yet still, we sin and die. And some of us seem very stuck indeed.

Well, maybe St. Paul offers the clue. In Romans 8 – not one of the readings for today, but well worth your time afterwards – he says that whole creation is groaning, as if in labour pains, waiting for the revealing of the glorious liberty of the children of God – that's us by the way. In other words, human beings are not yet what they will be. We are in the process of being born. There's no doubt, now, after Good Friday and Easter that we will be. There is no doubt that we will arrive in life, in light, in beauty and brilliance. But we are not there yet. For now, the whole creation is in labour pains, waiting for the birth. Our sin, our sickness, our death are all part of that. Right now, it is so real, so all consuming and so painful that it is almost all we can see. It fills our vision. But this is but the darkness before the dawn, and the dawn is of a day that shall never pass away, the day of glory, the day of the kingdom.

That's where we're going. That's where the great turn-around is pointing us, that's what the empty tomb means. Sickness and death and all the darkness behind them, all of it is being driven out. All of it will be driven out. And all who want it will be set free into the glorious liberty of the children of God, and the whole creation will sing with joy to see them. That's Easter means, and why we shout:

Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

