

A Pastoral Letter to all the Faithful, Wednesday, 1st April, 2020

Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed, hallelujah!

It is not quite time for this acclamation yet, and when we do proclaim it at the end of next week, it will probably have to be like the Italians, and proclaimed from our balconies (where we have them). What a joy filled acclamation it is!

I noticed a post on social media the other day which said something like: “I never expected my Lent to be as Lenten as my Lent has been.” Never mind giving up the alcohol, we’ve had milk and toilet paper to worry about, and we’ve all had to give up seeing friends, family and others. Who would have thought that we’d be giving up Church for Lent? As for buying chocolate Easter eggs, do they count as among the necessities for which we’re allowed to shop?

That first Easter Day, we’re told that an intrepid small huddle of disciples arrived at Jesus’ tomb while it was still dark, and discovered that the anointing of the body that they had come to do was impossible. Jesus was not there, “he is risen”.

That astounding claim is at the heart of our Christian message, that God in Christ was too strong to be held by the chains of death, and that new life, risen life, broke through.

The current circumstances, though very tough, are not as tough as the Influenza outbreak after the First World War, or the Black Death that took a third of British lives in the fourteenth century. The nation, and the Church, will come through it, although I cannot minimise the fear that some must feel at the possibility of huge risk to themselves.

In such circumstances, we must put our faith in the Lord. Whether we succumb to the virus, or whether we endure, we, who put our faith in Christ, are his, and his promise is that he will never let us go in life, in illness or, if it comes to that, in death –*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.38,39)*

And the guarantee of all this is given in Christ’s own resurrection, since he is *the firstborn from the dead* (Colossians 1.18).

However, resurrection can come before the last day. God can grant us little resurrections of the spirit of love, of generosity, or co-operation, and of hope, as we walk with him through the valley of the shadow of death. These are not trivial, they are the warp and weft out of which fullness of life is woven.

I urge you all to renew your faith in the risen Lord. I urge you to take next week, Holy Week, seriously, and to travel with Jesus through Jerusalem to Gethsemane and beyond. I urge you to hold out your hand that the Lord may take it, whatever paths we have to walk, that he may impart hope and love and grace.

And let us pray like we've never prayed before. In the year 590AD, Rome was in the clutches of plague, and my namesake, Pope Gregory, led a procession through Rome praying for God to spare his people and bring an end to the disease. It is said that when he arrived at the foot of the tomb of the Emperor Hadrian, he was given a vision of the archangel Michael sheathing his sword, which Gregory interpreted as a sign of the end of the plague. So it came to pass, and the tomb was given a new name, so that you can visit the Castel Sant'Angelo, the Castle of the Angel, to this day.

If I organised a procession today, the police would nab me for breaking government regulations. They would be right, because the regulations have been made to keep us safe, and anyway, I'm not sure that I would see Michael, or any other angel, atop the Cathedral tower; but we can pray this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you suffered death and burial for our sakes,
And rose again to save us.

We beseech you to hear us when we pray to you,
and in the midst of our tribulation, set us free.

Remove from us the threat of this virus, if it be your will,
but in all things, give us love, give us hope, give us strength.

Amen.