

SERMON – EASTER SUNDAY YEAR C 2022

Introduction

A few months ago I visited someone who was dying in a rest home. The wife had wanted me to pray and anoint their husband to reassure him that he had nothing to fear. And so I went and prayed and blessed him and it seemed to reassure him and bring comfort to his wife. It was a special moment to which being a Priest can often occur. A sacred moment. During the visit I used the set prayers we have for the anointing of the sick. Psalms, prayers and blessings. These are familiar words for those who know them and that is why they often bring comfort to those who are perhaps incapacitated due to illness. What was interesting about this visit was what happened afterwards. I went upstairs to join the wife and another relative for morning tea.

As we sat to enjoy our cups of coffee the relative asked me a few questions about being a Priest. And then she asked me one question which at the time seemed ordinary, however it has stuck with me ever since. She said I am not

particularly religious, but I have a question. Why do you say the same words every time? Now in some sense this is question I have had before when talking about an Anglican service and the liturgy with someone. And I usually have an answer as I have thought about it before. But on this occasion, for some unknown reason I just couldn't think of a good answer, I had forgotten.

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In the Gospel today we see a group of people who had forgotten. We know it well. Their teacher and leader Jesus had only days earlier been betrayed, captured, interrogated, beaten and then lead to an excruciating death upon a wretched cross. And to make matters worse throughout this ordeal, and may I add, to the absolute astonishment of his followers he had not even tried to defend himself. Even though this Jesus was innocent of the accusations levelled at him, it seems he didn't care. And so not only did these disciples see their friend and teacher die so cruelly, they also watched him accept his fate without even uttering a word.

No wonder they had all fled, denied and scattered their teacher other than a few women disciples who stayed and watched. In the enormity of these events the majority of them had completely forgotten, and when we forget, then we begin to fear, and when we fear we lose hope.

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And in a sense we have forgotten. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit 2 years ago we could only watch in horror as this unknown disease spread quickly around the globe. We wondered to ourselves how could this happen? In the 21st century, with the miracles of modern medicine and all the mind blowing technology at our fingertips. How could a microscopic virus bring the world to its knees? We then watched on as world leaders started to panic and organisations like the World Health Organisation started to give us almost contradictory advice on how to battle it. One week it was that masks are not effective, the next week they were. Of course this is not entirely their fault, they were dealing with a new virus. However it didn't help to instil confidence in the world.

And then it all became real for us. Our first cases arrived in New Zealand and we responded with lockdowns to protect ourselves. And then what followed over the next 2 years was the movement in and out of lockdown until we could get the majority of the country vaccinated. And during this time I know like myself many of us became glued to our televisions every press conference to hear the 'latest case numbers.' And perhaps sadly, deaths. And this all felt like vital information at the time, however it seems to have never stopped and even today we get running cases and deaths in the NZ Herald on a daily basis. And as much as we try and look away or turn it off we find ourselves looking at them, and then shutting ourselves away. And of course the natural reaction to all of this is fear, and when we fear we lose hope.

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And so it was where we left our disciples. Fearful, locked away. For 2 days they had been in the upper room. And it took the courage of the women disciples to venture out and go and honour their teacher by anointing his body. If they had never taken that step then perhaps they would have never experienced what was about to take place.

Again we know it well. They arrive at the tomb to find the stone rolled away and the body missing. Their fear now turned to bewilderment. And while in this state suddenly two men appeared, dazzling them with those earth shattering words, who do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. And then the most important thing happened. They remembered. Their fear which had made them forget was suddenly replaced with a memory, 'the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Aha. They got it, they remembered. And when faced with such truth their only reaction was to run and tell the others. They now had hope.

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And so it is for us. It is no surprise that we have become fearful. For no one denies that there has been something to fear. A Virus which spreads invisibly and at seemingly blistering pace is something to be concerned about. People who are vulnerable can die. And every time someone dies there is a sadness. However like those women who came to the tomb on that first Easter morning we also have to leave our fear and go and look at the tomb. And in doing

so we too will be confronted and then remember. For us this can mean simply getting some perspective. For all the terrible destruction this virus has done, the cautious number for the survival rate is 98%, some even put it at 99.5%. And in New Zealand a few weeks ago we reached the 500 death milestone. A grim number. However perhaps surprisingly that is the same amount of deaths we had from the flu in 2019. And we of course don't publicise our flu deaths on a daily basis. Now of course the COVID number of deaths will climb as the months go on. And I am well aware that many may have long term problems from catching COVID, which can be devastating.

So please understand that I know this. But we must remember. It is so important. Especially for us as Christians. For if I can think of one causality of this pandemic it has been our hope. We, like those disciples, have forgotten that we are people of hope.

And that is why we must remember. We must remember that 2000 years ago God came to those disciples in the person of Jesus Christ, he walked amongst them, he taught them how to love, he taught them how to overcome their fears, he taught them to have hope. But they forgot. As they abandoned him and ran away they forgot who he was.

It was only when a few of them with the courage to venture out were they able to remember.

That this Jesus of Nazareth was to be handed over, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. And through this act he would redeem us from the greatest fear of all, the fear of death and sin. In his death and resurrection, as CS Lewis put it “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” When you can’t listen properly you forget, and when you forget you lose hope.

And so as I sat in my office this week writing this sermon I suddenly remembered the answer to that question posed to me that day, why do you say the same words every time? Because we don’t want to forget. We believe this message is so powerful, so important, that week after week, year after year we remind ourselves of it. We remember. That he has risen, He has risen indeed, Alleluia.