EASTER DAY 3103013

John 20: 1-18

Easter Sunday is a dramatic day. We have light, colour and wonderful music here in church. The language is hope and triumph – the defeat of sin and death through the power of God. But did you notice that the gospel account which we have just heard is nothing like Easter as we celebrate it. Easter in John’s gospel is people shuffling around in the early dawn – and the wonderfully mundane line, ‘Then the disciples returned to their own homes.’ It’s not far short of ‘and then they went home for tea’

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, finds it empty and believes that the body has been stolen. She fetches Simon Peter and the other disciple who run to the tomb, find the folded grave clothes. Peter doesn’t know what he sees – the other disciple believes. And then they go home. Mary meets the gardener – and in the knowing and being known she knows Jesus and believes. This is the story of disciples who love their Master with all their heart – but don’t know what is going on. They are in the middle of a story but don’t understand it.

Not so different I think from the faith experience of many of us. We feel that it ought to be clear – but if somebody explains it with complete clarity we feel vaguely unsatisfied because, whatever it is that God is, he should be more than tidy. For myself, I have days when the fires of faith burn bright and days when I am left rooting around among some dead-looking embers. I was on the edge of tears yesterday listening to a little bit of Bach’s St John Passion on the radio – taken by surprise by the words ‘It is finished’ – sung in German which I didn’t understand. And at other times I feel almost nothing. The first of the Nine Marks of Mission in our diocesan Casting the Net movement is ‘Worship that renews and inspires’ – we seek to fan the flames and stir the embers.

You are probably surprised that I should describe the faith experience like this – after all it’s sort of my job to be on top of all this and to have the certainties of my faith well polished. But God isn’t like that. Jesus was born in a stable at Bethlehem. It was foretold but unexpected. The people who were part of the story gradually worked out what was happening. My former parishioners used to say, ‘God’s ways are not our ways’ as a way of resolving the unresolvable. I would rather say that God does what God does in God’s way – his purposes are always loving, always for good. We may find it unexpected. But the effort to grasp it sets our feet on a journey of discipleship which leads to hope and to life.

Let me offer you the certainty which I have in my heart. I believe that the patient and innocent suffering and sacrifice of Good Friday are how God works. God doesn’t mend things – God transforms them by suffering. I watched on YouTube yesterday my friend Ian Douglas, Bishop of Connecticut, with his dioceses and others taking part in a Stations of the Cross in Washington. It’s about the families of Newtown where a gunman killed 20 children and six adults. What the video showed was a couple of hundred people wrapped up against a grey and sleety day witnessing to their faith – what their hearts said was that God can somehow transform this suffering and bring good from it.

Easter shouts from the housetops to a world which too easily gives itself to cynicism, pessimism, defeat and despair. Easter says that God overcomes all this. The Easter gospel is that the Risen Christ is a sign of God’s power over sin and death - human pain and loss – hunger and injustice – looks at great suffering – looks at the everyday failures in all of our lives – our disappointments and our faltering relationships.

Think again about the disciples in the early dawn. They didn’t find a large sign in the empty tomb which said, ‘Christ is Risen so everything is all right’ They had to learn gradually that this was a new time and a new kind of Jesus – the one who called Peter to get out of the boat and walk on the water; who told them to cast the net on the other side; who told them to go and make disciples. Gradually, gradually, they learn it and the energy from that learning spreads the gospel of hope to every corner of the world.

The gospel of hope – but what is special about that gospel is that it is God’s great story. It joins joy and sorrow together in a way which makes sense of them both. It is the triumph of love over all things.