

## **Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne for 10am Sung Eucharist St Mary's Barnes on the Second Sunday of Easter 28 April 2019**

Early last Sunday morning, Easter Day, the news broke that terrible bombings had taken place in a number of different locations in Sri Lanka – a concerted terrorist attack on several Christian churches and three hotels. The number of those killed was over 250 and hundreds more were injured. In one village alone nearly every household has been mourning its dead and making funeral preparations. The scale of the attack has sent shock waves around the world. ISIS have claimed responsibility. As Sri Lankan Christians met to worship the risen Christ on Easter Day, they were all suddenly and cruelly pushed back into experiencing Good Friday in devastatingly personal terms. Many churches in Sri Lanka are closed this morning, with no services being said, for fear of further attacks. Our hearts go out to the people of Sri Lanka at this time of great tragedy, coming ten years after the cessation of their civil war.

Easter cannot be separated from Good Friday: the paschal mystery at the centre of our faith is one. The depths of suffering for Jesus had to be plunged, as well as a cruel death, before he rose again for us on Easter morning. And what is true for Jesus is true for humanity. We all have our personal sorrows and burdens to bear as we journey through life. But as Christians we know that Christ is with us in our sufferings and that he has overcome all evil and devastation. His death and resurrection have transformed evil and redeemed it.

In our gospel reading today from John we have heard an account of how the disciples of Jesus are spending their evening on that first Easter Day. They have all been through the heartache of Maundy Thursday evening, when after supper Jesus was arrested and later put on trial, and the horror of Good Friday when their beloved leader was cruelly put to death by crucifixion. Only a few women, including Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene, and John the beloved disciple, were brave enough to follow Jesus to Golgotha and stand at the foot of his cross. The rest had forsaken him and fled. And on the evening of Easter Day, despite the fact that in the morning Mary Magdalene had appeared to them with the extraordinary news that Jesus had risen from the dead, they were huddled together in a house with the doors locked, living in fear. They were terrified that what had happened to Jesus might also happen to them. And then suddenly, Jesus appears to them in his risen body and says to them:

“Peace be with you”.

He understands their fears, their doubts and their slowness to believe. And so he shows them his hands and his side. For in his risen spiritual body the scars of the wounds of his body, caused by the nails and the soldier's lance, are visible. It can be no one else: it can only be Jesus risen from the dead. And at last the mystified disciples believe, and they rejoice. And Jesus has a purpose for them, a task to fulfil: they are to be sent out, just as Jesus himself had been sent, with the message of the proclamation of the resurrection, for all to hear. Nothing will ever be the same again: Jesus has risen from the dead. And further, they are to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to carry out their task. At the heart of their message will be the major theme of forgiveness. For wherever people forgive, there will indeed be the gift of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is often of course a long journey. One of my favourite books on the subject has as its title: *Don't Forgive Too Soon* (by Matthew, Sheila and Dennis Linn). For at the end of the day forgiveness is not something we do simply by ourselves: it is the gift of God. Often there will be a long emotional and spiritual journey to undertake first, when all kinds of feelings of anger and fear and helplessness and despair have to be gone through. God's Spirit within us accompanies us on this painful journey, until at last, hopefully we are enabled to let go and forgive. For the people of

Sri Lanka, this will be a very, very long journey. And so we hold them in our hearts today, and pray for their healing and for peace in that devastated land. May they know that the risen Christ weeps with them.

Following on in our gospel reading today, there is one of the disciples who is not present when Jesus appears that Easter evening. Thomas is absent. He misses out. And so it is very hard for him when the others tell him what has happened. No doubt he wrestles with feelings of exclusion and abandonment. His friends say that they have experienced something wonderful, that Jesus is alive again, but he was not there to share the experience with them. And so he doubts them. He won't believe them until he sees for himself. And Jesus, ever generous, gives Thomas another chance. A week later, Jesus appears again in the house, and this time Thomas is there. Jesus repeats his greeting of peace. Jesus knows and understands Thomas' need physically to see and touch him in order to believe Jesus is alive again. So Jesus invites Thomas to touch his scars. But there is no need. All Thomas' fears and doubts and misgivings and resentments melt away, and he exclaims:

"My Lord and my God!"

From Good Friday onwards the disciples had been in a state of great inner conflict. They were overwhelmed with conflicted thoughts and emotions. They had followed and grown to love and trust Jesus as their Lord, even as Peter had proclaimed, their Messiah. But then with Jesus' death they were thrown into confusion and fear and panic. Their lives were turned upside down and they were overwhelmed with a sense of purposelessness and no doubt conflicted self-questioning. Literature has its famous examples of such self-questioning: Shakespeare's Hamlet in his soliloquies and Richard III waking from his nightmare on the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field. And St Paul in the seventh chapter of his Letter to the Romans writes inspiringly of his inner conflict of moral dilemma:

"I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do".

With Jesus' cruel death the disciples were left in a state of inner turmoil. We all no doubt in our lives at certain times have known inner turmoil, conflicted thoughts and feelings, whether these are brought about by changing circumstances, or relationships going wrong, or whatever it might be. Many of the great saints have written of such moments, often prior to their conversion, such as St Augustine of Hippo in his autobiography entitled Confessions.

It is part of the human condition to experience inner conflict, fear, self-doubt and a sense of isolation or abandonment at times. But the message of Eastertide is that all these things, however dark and painful, have been taken on and experienced and suffered by God in Christ: and that through Christ's glorious resurrection all these things, including death itself, have been overcome.

So in this Easter season we pray for all who suffer and who live in hopelessness: we pray especially for the people of Sri Lanka, that they may be given hope in the darkness of their great sorrow. We hold in our hearts all the tragic situations of the world, all people who are suffering conflict, injustice, war and poverty, and we remember that God has done something decisive about all the evil and suffering that blights people's lives and threatens our planet. For God in Christ has revealed to humanity and all creation the life of a man, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came among us and shared our sorrows, and died, and rose again, bringing our humanity with him to God through his Ascension. In this glorious Easter season let us live with hope rising in our hearts, and rejoice that Christ is risen from the dead, and that we are privileged to partake in his resurrection. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!



