

Merrylea Parish Church Glasgow.

Pastoral homily by the Locum the Revd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 26th April 2020

Second Sunday after Easter.

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin) was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting, and believe!" Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you see me? how happy are those who believe without seeing me!" (St. John 20: 24-29).

Some years ago, I came across an article which recounted an interview given by the actor, comedian and writer Stephen Fry. I kept it because of the personal honesty expressed by him. He was asked what he would say to God if ever he met God face to face. He responded by saying that if, indeed, God exists as the creator of everything and is all-powerful, he would call God an "evil, capricious, monstrous, maniacal bastard" for inventing cancer and permitting wars and allowing so many to suffer excruciating and undeserved pain. Initially, this shocked me for I had understood that, as a young man, he had seriously considered becoming a priest. And, then, I realised what greater example could there be than this of speaking truth to power?

Suffering has unexpectedly loomed large in the lives of so many. Since the advent of the coronavirus crisis, over 18,000 deaths have occurred within the United Kingdom directly related to the virus, including over 1600 in Scotland (at time of writing). Over 170,000 globally. Each and every one not just a bland statistic but a human being whose life has been cut short by an unseen viral disease emanating from the other side of the world. Life for many of those who now grieve has been turned upside down as they struggle to come to terms with their loss. For others, suffering has come in more materialistic terms: perhaps the impending loss of a business they have spent a lifetime building, with the threat of employees being made redundant and all the knock on pain that can cause. While for others still, being in a state of lockdown has meant a continuing battle against whatever their own personal demons, dilemmas and issues may be.

There has been, however, a particular issue raised as a consequence of this crisis which has caused many families enormous concern - and not a little grief - but which has escaped the attention of many. In both England and Scotland reports have been made of adults with physical and learning difficulties, including those with autism and brain injuries, being made subject to a DNR order (Do Not Resuscitate) were they to fall ill with coronavirus. Reported instances have suggested that this has happened without any consultation with families.

I fully accept and understand that medical professionals have exceedingly difficult and challenging decisions to make when it comes to triaging patients with this terrible virus. However, surely there is a conversation to be had. Especially about whether patients who are less likely to survive should automatically lose out to those who are fundamentally healthy when it comes to hard pressed medical attention and machinery. Having autism, for example, does not mean one is any less physically healthy than anyone else. This being so, should not official guidelines to health professionals be tailored to the needs of

the individual rather than being issued with regard to whole categories of people? If we are to believe that all life is sacred then, whoever may be responsible, surely no-one has the right to determine that some lives are less worthwhile than others, when no medical issues are at stake.

Or do they? You must answer for yourself.

The abuse of power lay at the heart of the decision to crucify Jesus. Nothing new there! Since history began religious people have worshipped power, giving the source of ultimate power a name (God, Allah, Yahweh). In doing so, they have been just the same as non-religious people. Whether it be a monarch, a prime minister, a CEO or God – the human temptation to suck up to power is the same.

More often than not its end result is the same: grief and disillusionment, despair and pain.

So: where is God in all of this? Where is God in the face of all the countless tragedies and injustices that scar individuals and humanity day and daily the world over? Why are wars fought? Why does cancer and dementia ravish the lives of our loved ones? Why are so many men, women and children trafficked as if modern-day slaves?

If God exists, where can he/she be found?

That's the very question the bewildered and bereft disciples must have wondered immediately following the death of their beloved leader, whom they thought was about to change the world.

In the above Gospel story, Thomas is not with the other disciples when Jesus appears to them following the resurrection. When he is told Jesus is alive, Thomas (a character who brilliantly represents our human doubts and cynicism) thinks it all nonsense, fantasy even. After all, he grieves for a man physically wounded and, then, killed. Until, that is, it is as though Jesus appears to him, too. Calling on Thomas to put his hands in the wounds. Calling on him to accept the reality of what has happened but, also, to realise how the consequence of that reality has the power to transform: flooding the emptiness of loss, grief and anger with a sense of presence and purpose; to realise also that even at times of life's greatest tragedies, personal failures or most profound hurt, there is a choice to be made. Will we allow this experience of suffering, loss or trauma to be the end of our dreams, to kill our ambitions, to deaden our soul, to be the place where – for us – life ends or, where new possibilities begin?

Sometimes, when confronted by profound grief, anger or hate, I have found it more helpful to remain silent than to attempt to offer some justification or explanation. But what lies behind such questioning is why, for me, the Jesus story is the most theologically revolutionary story that there can be. It imagines God and power separated. It offers us God as a baby, God poor, God helpless on a cross, God with a mocking crown of thorns. It is Caesar with all the power. And the real question the Jesus story poses is: which one will you follow when push comes to shove? You can follow what is right and suffer for it. Or, you can cosy up to power and claim you are doing as your told.

According to the gospel of Jesus, God is the story of human dreams and fears. God is the shape we try to make of our lives. God is the respect we ought to have for our planet. God is the poetry of our lives. Quite simply God is love. And love that is real, true, deep and pure is a love that lives and allows total freedom so that glorious possibilities might be realised within every single human life.

Whatever the world's suffering, we should all thank God for that.

Prayer:

God of love, we are taught that you are the Creator of all things, the Author of all being, that your love is unceasingly at work in the world bringing order from chaos and filling emptiness with life. Today I offer you the worship of my heart and soul. Though isolated and uncertain, in you I place my trust, for your love would lead me to experience real life in all its fullness. So let not my isolation make me meaner in spirit nor locked into my own wants only. Following the example of Jesus, may I recognise the infinite value of every life, of our interdependence with each other and with the world of which we are a part.

During this time of upheaval, I pray for my loved ones: family, friends, neighbours, colleagues at work, folks who share my church pew. Though distanced from each other, may each be strengthened by the inspiration of those within our health-care services and all who have volunteered support, working hard on the front-line in hospitals and communities to restore, comfort and heal. May your loving presence be known to all living and working within care-homes and all who live alone. Let none be afraid, for there is no room for fear in love; and we share our love for others because you loved us first. So let us not despair. May the resolve we now show turn us towards each other in kindness, giving us a richer sense of ourselves as a human family: one caring for another. For each of us matters to you our God, and nothing matters more.

Hear now the family prayer of your Church: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.