

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.
Homily by the Locum, the Revd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 19 April 2020
Low Sunday.

From the time of that very first Easter Day, news of Christ's resurrection has been celebrated in people's homes and received by people scattered by all manner of circumstance. No less so than today. Threat of the coronavirus keeps us separated within the relative safety of our own surroundings unable to join together for worship or social events and, yet, our faith ensures we remain connected in ways that are new and different with all who rejoice with us in the good news we believe we have to share. This may have been an Easter like no other but its message still retains the ability to empower us for life yet to dawn. Politicians may call that resilience. I call it resurrection.

It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. After saying this he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (St John 20: 19-23).

Following Jesus' political execution, his friends did the wise thing. Having had the stuffing knocked out of them by what they had regarded as the impossible happening, they went into hiding. Lockdown. They retreated to their own homes and kept the doors locked and windows barred because of feelings of terror. They self-isolated; lying-low, trying to be inconspicuous, afraid that, should they be seen publicly, they might be identified, arrested and executed too. So, since the afternoon of Good Friday, that's what they have all been doing, hiding. It's why we call today Low Sunday.

That was when something happened. Something that none of them would ever forget. Something that made all the difference in the world. Something that challenges everything they thought they knew about life and death.

Suddenly, he's there. Jesus stands there and says, "*Peace be with you*". And so that they won't miss the point, he says a second time, "*Peace be with you*". And then, he tells them why he is there, why they have been blessed with this Easter experience, "*As the Father has sent me,*" he says, "*so I send you*". In other words, in showing them where the door is, he is wanting them out of their hideaways and into the world of their everyday. Somehow he restores their confidence and strengthens their resolve to get up and get moving again. They realise they have work to do only they can do. Is that not what resurrection is about?

This Easter has truly been like no other. Over these last weeks, individuals and families have been solely tested by imposed isolation and heartbroken by the tragic loss of loved ones. So many people have grown anxious about possible unemployment and a future full of uncertainty and despair. Already politicians, concerned about the future economic well-being of the country, are nervously seeking an 'exit strategy' only to be told that the time for that is not yet. Not sure what the months ahead will hold, when freedom will return to the individual, schools and businesses reopen and the world of commerce and industry allowed their potential, it's tempting to feel overwrought by present stresses and dismal about future opportunities. Even within the family of the Church.

Some time ago, Fraser Nelson, editor of *the Spectator*, wrote an article under the banner, *"The decline of religion accelerates when Christians hide their faith"*. In it, he maintained that today in the United States you have to be religious to get yourself elected, whereas in the United Kingdom you increasingly have to pretend not to be. He wrote, *"It's natural that the decline of religion should be accompanied by the general lack of understanding about what faith is about. British Christians have always been rather bad at explaining and defending themselves. As a result, we end up with the myths: Christians vs Gays, Christians vs Science – that lie unchallenged – even by the Churches. This bashful silence has become a problem."*

We are part of that society. And that means our faith, and our witness, need to be large enough to embrace individuals and whole communities of people who live each day in poverty and fear, injustice and exhaustion.

The message of Low Sunday is as simple as it is thrilling. It reminds us that the risen Christ appeared in places where disciples found themselves. In a garden first. On a road as people walked next. In people's own homes.

This year, the great doors of our churches and cathedrals have been firmly closed. Instead of our turning up to greet him in and through our worship, Christ comes to us – wherever we are. Because of this coronavirus crisis, his love has been known through extraordinary things that not long ago we thought we would never hear or see: bravery from health-care workers and selfless dedication of doctors and nurses. Kindness and intimacy too: nurses clasping the hand of someone dying without loved ones being able to be close. Unexpected acts of neighbourliness. People being extra-careful to keep a safe distance when passing on the pavement. Examples are almost endless. All of them ways in which God's love is being encountered.

Some would say that the Church is dying and would save it with cod-management practices, or evangelical up-speak, or through internet congregations. But, essentially churches, like 'live theatre', can never be truly replicated on-line. Church-going is about the solidarity of sitting in the same pew with others, being involved in the same liturgy, trying to get on with people with whom you otherwise don't have much else in common. In other words, it's about hearing the message of this day and allowing the risen Christ to energise us and transform us so that we, too, leave our comfort zones to engage with the world's realities wherever they may be found and whatever they may be.

Christian discipleship has never been easy. Its roots are grounded in a cross and an empty tomb. Its practice demands dedication and faithfulness. Its message is eternal. Its love for humanity unending. Its reward, priceless. And so, in these troubled times, *"Peace be with you"*.

Prayer for Today:

Loving God, its so easy to feel sorry for ourselves at times like this. Isolation can bring such terrible loneliness for some and family stress for others. Anxiety can cause us to become so dis-spirited and fear can bring its demons. Remind us Lord God that to the mystery of undeserved suffering you bring the deeper mystery of unmerited love. I give thanks for your love at work in the world this day: so plain to witness in hospital, hospice and care-home; in schools, too, where children of essential workers are cared for. Such dedication and, indeed, sacrifice goes far beyond what is normal. So, when I am down and despairing keep me mindful of my good fortune to be alive and in good health. Bless all whom I love, wherever they may be; and may my friends and neighbours know my gratitude for their kind thoughts and acts. Comfort the dying and strengthen the grieving. And should I feel the hours long, speak my name in my heart that I might worship you boldly and know your peace. Today, I sum up all the prayers lingering within by saying the family prayer of Jesus: 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. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and evermore. AMEN.