

Easter Day

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Easter Day, Sunday 17 April 2022

Readings: Acts 10 vv 34-43 and Luke 24 vv 1-12

In the warmth of yesterday's sunshine, and with the business of getting the church ready for Easter, it was difficult to remember that it was Holy Saturday, a bleak day, a day of emptiness. A day when hope seemed to have evaporated after the appalling events of Good Friday. Crucifixion left no room for human dignity.

The kindness of strangers had helped. Simon, a visitor from Cyrene, helped Jesus to carry his heavy cross to the place of execution. Joseph of Arimathea allowed Jesus to be buried in the tomb which he had purchased for his own use. Indeed, some of the most beautiful pictures depicting Holy Week and Easter are those representing the deposition, the removal of Jesus' body from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and others; and the grieving Mary, cradling the body of Jesus in her arms, the Pietà.

When the crucifixion was over, when Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb, his friends could see no future. All that they had hoped for seemed to have gone. The following day, Holy Saturday, was empty and barren.

It's not easy to take ourselves back to the mood of the disciples on that Saturday some two thousand years ago. The intensity of emotion during that last week of Jesus' earthly life must have been overwhelming. Let's just walk through it again.

The week began with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, greeted by crowds who were excited that the preacher from Galilee was coming into the city. But the crowd lost interest once the spectacle had finished. Normal life resumed.

There was much going on in the background during that first Holy Week. It's not entirely clear from the gospels how much the disciples were involved. But Jesus was active. Jesus didn't like what he saw in the Temple, where what was a regular part of worship had become little more than a huge commercial operation, completely out of proportion and overshadowing the worship it was supposed to have enabled. Jesus' righteous anger at what he found in the Temple stoked up the hostility towards him from the religious leaders of the day. They were so focussed on their needs and practices that they couldn't see the reality of who Jesus was. They couldn't see what Jesus' disciples had grasped - that Jesus was the Son of God, the longed-for Messiah.

And so events took their course. Judas accepted a bribe to betray Jesus, so that Jesus could be captured without attracting attention. Then came Jesus' arrest and trial. He was a nuisance to the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. They didn't want to be bothered by what they must have seen as a little local difficulty, but the pressure was on them. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, must have been surprised when the crowds in Jerusalem shouted for Jesus to be crucified. The very crowds who had been excited just a few days ago when Jesus had come into Jerusalem sealed his fate. They did not know what they were doing. How could they? Soon, the crowd dispersed. Normal life resumed.

Jesus was taken to Golgotha, the hill outside the city, where he was nailed to the cross, like any common criminal. Jesus died in agony, taking upon himself the whole weight of human sin and failure.

Jesus' friends took responsibility for his body. They buried him carefully in a tomb, but could not complete all that they had to do because of the demands of religious observance over the Passover. And it's hard to imagine that they passed that Saturday in anything other than emotional and spiritual numbness. They seem to have been too exhausted and broken even for anger.

In the silence of Holy Saturday, while normal life went on, God was at work. Amazingly. Wonderfully. In ways that words cannot begin to express. So much so that when the women came to the tomb early on the Sunday morning, they found the empty tomb. Initially they were stunned. No wonder the disciples did not believe what seemed to be a fanciful and absurd story – 'an idle tale' as Luke describes the disciples' snap judgement. There must have been some other explanation. But something made Peter check it out. And he was amazed.

Gradually, over the coming weeks, Jesus' disciples began to understand the amazing truth that Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday was not the end. They had encounters with Jesus that left them in no doubt that he was alive. Different, certainly. Not always immediately recognisable. But very much alive.

They learned that none of the forces of evil could prevent God's love breaking through into his world. God breaks into the normal routine and offers hope and purpose.

As we have seen Jesus, through our own experience and through the eyes of the gospel writers, we have had a precious glimpse of God, alive and active in his world and wanting us to bask and rejoice in love that we can scarcely imagine.

My faith means nothing unless it is rooted in Easter, in the resurrection of Jesus, in the amazement of Jesus' disciples that Good Friday was not the end. The power of God that was the experience of that first Easter Day continues to be at work, in signs of hope where there has previously been none.

After the bleakness of winter comes spring. After the darkness of night, the light of day. After Good Friday, Easter.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.