

Sermon for Sunday 17 April 2022 (Easter Day) by The Very Revd Philip Buckler

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

On a tombstone in a Parish Church in London are carved the following words. 'A memento mori' - 'As thou art, so was I' as I am, so shalt thou be'. The deceased, one John Rickston, who died in 1687, is warning us all not to forget our mortality. Whatever our fortune, we must remember, as Shakespeare put it, golden lads and girls, all must as chimney sweepers come to dust. We are creatures of birth and death, part of God's creation.

On Easter morning, we look at another tombstone. This one has been rolled away. There's no writing on this stone, and the tomb itself is empty. Yet if we look and listen carefully, we shall hear the words 'He is risen', words that were whispered at first amongst a fearful and perplexed group of disciples, words that both confused and yet excited them. Then, gradually, these words were spoken aloud to others. They were proclaimed with urgency and passion. And so these words have echoed down the centuries to this very morning, when, together with countless Christians across the world, we shout, 'Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah.'

A question is posed at the end of T S Eliot's Christmas poem 'Journey of the Magi' - Were we led all that way for birth or death? For whenever we encounter the reality of God, we find that our own expectations, the way we understand things, are turned upside down. That was what happened in the temple at Jerusalem when Jesus symbolically turned the tables upside down. It's what happened above all that first Easter morning. Death was turned to life. Despair turned into hope.

Surely here is a message for our fearful world today. Anxious about the war in Ukraine and the dreadful suffering and destruction, anxious about pandemics, global warming, and many other issues that confront us. Without minimising or trivialising the suffering and loss so many are enduring, there is a hope that transcends our normal way of viewing life and urges us to look again.

But was Easter day just a happy ending, or was it something new and different? Certainly it brought relief after the events of the Passion and Good Friday. But Easter inaugurated a whole new order. The stone had been rolled away from the mouth of eternity, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new.' A new creation. That is what we celebrate today. God's love has been poured out. It's been rejected and destroyed in human terms, but has triumphed over death and destruction to open up this new creation. It offers a way of living that stretches into the very presence of God himself, a life that is eternal.

So where do we stand on a tombstone reminding us grimly of our mortality? Or in a room like those first disciples, a room locked for fear of the outside world? No, on Easter day, we are summoned to the empty tomb. Not just to stand outside looking in and wondering at the fact of resurrection. More importantly, we

are to enter the tomb and know what Paul called the power of Christ's resurrection. For it is from within the tomb that we can look out at the world afresh and see it as a new creation.

So we, too, venture out as the community of those who have known the power of the resurrection in their own lives. Those who have found how God's love has overcome their own mistakes and malevolence, their fears and failures, in countless ways, both small and great, the Church community bears witness to that new creation where God's love encounters even death, and raises triumphant into glory.

That is why the Church today, beset as it is with its own divisions and difficulties that seem so intractable, can yet dare to speak to the world in which we are set. A world beset by tragedies and terrors, by needs and neglects that seem so hopeless. Two years ago, you recall our churches were locked for fear of coronavirus. But we know that Christ is not locked in them any more than he was bound by the tomb. On Easter day, the Church proclaims the message which has been whispered, spoken and shouted down the ages. A message that unlocks doors of fear, and tells how Christ is risen, and in his resurrection brings hope to all - a new creation.

In his death, Christ took on the pains and sorrows of our world. In his resurrection, he takes on the warning of that 17th century tombstone. And he's changed it and made it his own. 'As thou art so was I'. He entered into our humanity becoming just as we are. 'As I am, so shalt thou be'. In rising beyond death, he draws us to share in his resurrection and to become as he is. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah.