

Sermon for Sunday 7 April 2024 – The Second Sunday of Easter (Evensong)

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Psalm 143.1–11; Isaiah 26.1–9, 19; Romans 4.13–25

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

One of my favourite passages from the Book of Isaiah is this from Chapter 43. 'See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I'm making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.' Well, today, the first Sunday after Easter is traditionally known as Low Sunday. It's a Sunday when after all the emotion and intense spirituality of Holy Week and Easter, it's the Sunday when traditionally clergy take a day off. And choirs go on a holiday, and congregations take a day off as well. So everyone breathes a sigh of relief, if you like. So you might think it's a rather strange day to choose to launch a new service and have Evensong tonight. Which is why I like that passage from Isaiah, 'See, I'm doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?' Something new is always part of God's purpose. Something new is always going on because he's a God of life and a God of love. And very often what God is doing, we do not perceive or understand it.

So I think if you imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salomi, coming to the tomb on the early hours of the first Easter Day, and they come to the tomb of Jesus; What did they expect to see? What did they hope to achieve? I guess they came to do the equivalent of laying flowers on a loved one's grave, didn't they? They came to say goodbye, and they came to grieve and to comfort each other. I suppose they also came to take the first step in finding closure, to leave Jesus behind and to begin to look at what is life now beyond Jesus now that he is in the grave. What they didn't expect to find was an empty tomb, a risen Lord, and the promise of a new, enriched life with Jesus rather than an empty life without him. So, the very first Easter day tells us that God is always doing something new; 'Do you not perceive it?'

The new thing begins in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, who St. Paul describes as the first fruits of those risen from the dead, the very foundation of our faith. Now, while that new thing is happening, and those three faithful women are at the grave, everybody else in Jerusalem is asleep in bed. God does this amazing thing, and the world does not perceive it. St Paul writes to the Romans and spells out the significance of what this new thing means in the resurrection of Jesus. This most momentous thing that the world doesn't choose to notice or perceive. We're very used in our modern culture to use the language of inclusivity, aren't we? Everybody's welcome, everybody's included. We might struggle to make that sentiment a reality, but in the ancient world, in time of Jesus, such a sentiment wasn't even an ideal, it wasn't even thought of. Everybody included; that's a bit odd to the classical mind. The gods of the Romans and the Greeks were not involved in the affairs of men. They had no idea of salvation or forgiveness or blessing or life. At best, they were detached meddlers. Maybe they might grant you good fortune if you behaved yourself or bad fortune if you didn't. Caesar was compared to a God. Caesar didn't hear any prayers. Caesar was only interested in how much tax his conquered peoples would pay him.

The pagan gods of ancient Rome and Greece might be gods of war or fertility or rain or sunshine. As I said, they had no involvement in the affairs of people. They might grant you victory in battle, perhaps, or destruction of your enemies, but they were our gods, they're not your gods. So no idea of everybody being included. No idea of a God for everybody.

The Jews, of course, had a different understanding of God. The God of Israel was, is, the one true God. The calling of the Israelites had always been to be the light to lighten the nations, to, by their example, bring everybody to know the one true God of the Israelites. But if you look at it from their perspective, trying to do that hadn't worked out terribly well. The Kingdom of Israel and the people of Judah had been invaded and conquered by Babylonians and Assyrians and Philistines and Egyptians and all sorts. They've been carried off into slavery and exile. The only way they could make sense of that long tradition was to say to themselves, they must have sinned and been punished by God. So we must keep ourselves pure and separate from all the peoples of the world, all these cruel barbarians who've done all these things to us in the past.

So if you wanted to come to Israel's God, you had to become Jewish. And then God says, 'See, I'm doing a new thing. Now it springs up, Do you not perceive it? I'm making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland'. In his letter to the Romans, St Paul spells out what it is and how it is that God is doing this new thing. That the death of Jesus on the cross was the event upon which God took upon himself, all the brokenness, all the sin, all the errors, all the hostility, all the misunderstanding that divides people from one another, all the issues of race and gender and age and colour, all those things which through the centuries have divided and separated us from each other. God doesn't see it like that. He's the creator and the father of all of us. We have no reason to be divided because in Christ we are united.

St. Paul explains that that's what God promised to Abraham all those centuries ago, that he would be the father of many people. Abraham had the courage to believe the promise of God. The children of Abraham are not defined by race, or tradition, or law. Instead, like Abraham, the children of Abraham are those who believe in the promises of God. That promise was made new in the death and the resurrection of Jesus. We no longer have to earn our salvation by tiptoeing around a God who we might be afraid of. We no longer have to earn our salvation by belonging to a particular nation or tradition or group. We inherit our salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. God isn't a God to be feared and obeyed, but rather a God who, like a father, reaches out to his children, embracing them in mercy and love and grace. This is the amazing new thing that God has been doing in the death and the resurrection of Jesus. When we look at the situation in Gaza, with the war in Ukraine, or our collective attitudes to immigration, or how we view people and treat them, the message of the cross on the Easter is one that the thirsty world may find as good news.

Lent and Easter don't tend to gather much media coverage in our world. Maybe there's a deliberate reason for that; I don't understand it, but maybe sometimes good news stories are not what the media wants to share. But the good news is that Christ has risen, and the good news is that as a consequence of that, amazing things are happening, even though we may not choose to notice, or the media may not tell us, or we may not perceive it. If I were to tell you that there were 450 people in Long Melford Church

on Easter Day, you might be surprised because there were five baptisms and eight confirmations there that day. The Catholic Herald reported that Westminster Cathedral had to turn people away on Good Friday and Easter Day because it was so full. The Church of England has reported on a number of occasions that there's a growing enthusiasm around the country for, you guessed it, Evensong, even among younger people, because the language, the beauty, and the atmosphere of Evensong, convinced people about the certainty and trustworthiness of God in an uncertain world. There was a news report very recently that the war in Ukraine and the troubles in Gaza and even cancer in the royal family had so shaken people in the last few months that many were asking, where is the rock upon which our lives depend. Where is the certainty? Where can we stand and be sure?

And the answer is in our God, and people are looking to tell us about who that God is. So maybe God is still capable of doing new things, and maybe the world will not perceive it, or does not want to perceive it. But to those who do perceive and who do respond to the grace of God, St Paul writes that it will be reckoned to us as righteousness when we believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification.

Amen.