

2018 Sermon for Easter Day

A few years ago we had a long summer heatwave that bent two of the largest candles in the church right over. If I had known better I would have removed them from the church to lie flat in the Vestry where we keep what we use in worship.

Those candles were no longer 'fit for purpose' as people say. If lit they would only drip wax on the carpet. Heat caused the damage. And here is a paradox, only more heat applied, very, very, very carefully would have any hope of unbending them. The risk would be that too little heat would cause them to crack and break. Too much heat would cause them to melt. The care and the expertise needed to restore these candles so that they can do what they were made for – give light in darkness – is beyond me. So here they are, of no use to anyone and fit only for discarding.

The bent over candles symbolised for me our human condition. So much that happens to us, and all that we do that harms us and harms others, bends us out of our God-given shape. It happens to us personally. It happens to the world and the societies and the systems we create. You don't need me to rehearse for you the myriad ways so much human behaviour is destructive. Or to tell you how the powerful bend the vulnerable over with oppressive systems that distort our common humanity, and damage us all whether we participate or stand by indifferently.

Those candles are we poor humans under the burden of our powerlessness to change ourselves. 'In Adam all have died.'

Here is another candle, newly lit for the first time this Easter. We call it the paschal candle, which is just a fancy Greek name for the Easter Candle. Pascha the Greek word for Passover. It will stand here, tall and upright near the altar throughout the fifty days of Easter.

Then it will stand beside the font until next Easter. We will light it for baptisms and use it to light the baptismal candle to give the newly baptised person. It will only come back from the place of baptism to stand beside the coffins of those whose baptism is fulfilled in death.

These candles symbolise the story of Easter. The gentle, loving care needed to restore we humans comes to us in Jesus who shares our common life, who bears our burdens and bends under the weight of human sin, but does not break. He does not reject God as we do; he does not imagine himself all sufficient, as we do; he does not put his trust in systems to save us, as we do. He never looks away in the face of human need or creation's growing, as we do. He lives holding the unbroken gaze of God and it transforms our humanity as nothing else ever could, nor ever would have and nor could ever be revoked.

'In Christ shall all be made alive.'

We sang earlier 'for as in Adam all have died, even so in Christ, shall all be made alive.' This is the good news of Easter, as given expression by the apostle Paul. The first announcement was, Do not be afraid, he is not here in the tomb, he has been raised ...he is going ahead of you.'

The 'going ahead of us' is not just to take us out of this world but to empower us to be God's people transforming this world now. The raising of Jesus is not the resuscitation of a dead body but the transformation of an embodied life in such a way that those who first experienced Jesus risen from the grave, found him changed utterly, beyond recognition at times and yet at others their familiar friend.

I have no explanation for this, any more than the first disciples could explain it. They have left us their stories and their legacy in the community of the church which still gathers to remember and to believe.

What I share with them, and invite you to affirm you share also, is confidence in the God of life who brings us transformed, from the many tombs or our making to a life of such quality it can only be called 'eternal.' Do we believe God can do this - well look to Jesus, God says, he has been raised from the dead so that you will know I keep my promise to overturn your ultimate enemy death itself. And in raising him, God says, I give you his Spirit now that you become those who die to sin and live, alive to God in him.

Christ is the first fruits of a rich harvest of those willing to share the burdens that bend others under their weight, so that they might also become people restored to their full humanity.

The proclamation of Easter is the power of God to transform those bent over candles and remake them - remake us - in the image of this glorious Paschal candle, burning brightly in a world still too often in darkness and in need of that joyful, surprising cry echoing down through the centuries and throughout the whole creation, 'He has been raised from the dead.'

Christ is risen! Alleluia!