

## Daniel's Sermon

18 April 2021

Peter the Apostle is addressing a crowd of Jews at Solomon's Portico who have just witnessed him and John miraculously heal a man who from birth couldn't walk. He questions the crowd about their surprise, marvelling at their disbelief. He automatically equates their ignorance with how they, a few weeks prior, rejected and killed the Righteous One, the Author of Life, the Lord Jesus Christ – the very person in whose name they healed the man. Peter is clear that the Israelites and Gentile rulers are responsible for this.

Yet this is not the end of the story. God has raised Jesus from the dead. And there is a chance of redemption for all. Rowan Williams writes that "the exaltation of the condemned Jesus is presented by the disciples not as a threat but as promise and hope. The condemning court, the murderous 'city', is indeed judged as resisting the saving will of God; but that does not mean that the will of God ceases to be saving. The rulers and the people are in rebellion; yet they act 'in ignorance'...and God still waits to be graciously present in 'times of refreshing'...And grace is released when the judges turn to their victim and recognise him as their hope and their saviour."

Both readings today are written by St Luke, one from his Gospel account, the other from the Acts of the Apostles (unquestionably the greatest sequel of all time). As the only non-Jewish New Testament writer, Luke holds a rather unique position among the contributors to the canon. As an outsider – a Gentile pagan by birth – being grafted into God's people through the new covenant of Christ, it's not surprising that he should be one of the most outward looking and inclusive of all the biblical writers.

Peter's encouragement to the crowd to repent of their sins and accept the grace offered them is set within the context of a healing miracle. This is there as a sign to those who condemned Christ that only in his name is the saving and restorative power of God to be found. In this powerful passage, Luke emphasizes the possibility of forgiveness and healing for all people. But what is important is that, as healed sinners, Peter and John are now on a lifelong mission to go forth with good news – and to heal, in every sense, and in the name of Jesus.

This radical idea (as we see in those early chapters of Acts) draws people in and also creates enemies. As during the ministry of Jesus when the religious leaders were offended at his healing people, so now these apostolic imitators of Christ post-resurrection are persecuted by the establishment for the same thing. They are threatened and affronted by acts of healing and inclusion. Instead, as Peter words it, they're only familiar with their own power and piety. Anything that upsets the status-quo or makes them uneasy is treated as suspect and then with hostility. Sadly, this same sad story has played out time and again throughout the history of our own faith. In times of change and challenge, people retreat or react, thus not allowing themselves to fully see the grace that God is trying to offer anew in each generation and epoch.

Pope Francis is one individual who has greatly overturned the status-quo. The first non-European pope since the eighth century, the first ever Jesuit pope, and the first pope from the Americas and southern hemisphere – he has always represented difference, change, even upheaval. Bringing forth many Jesuit principles to the forefront of his papacy, Francis consistently emphasises the mercy and compassion of God, not indisputable doctrines and traditions to be upheld; Francis constantly reaches out to those on the margins: refugees, homeless, the sick, choosing to live in humble lodgings and dress in modest attire. He is a man who understands the way of Christ, living out that healing and restoring life Peter and John also strived toward.

Washing the feet of Muslims. Encouraging debate and disagreement among his peers, rather than enforcing a party-line. Allowing for the inclusion of divorced and remarried people back into Holy Communion. Commanding the Church not to judge LGBT people. Being foremost a pastor and healer.

There are so many, sadly, who simply do not understand this new radical kind of papacy. I know a number of conservative Catholics who despise the current pope. For them, bringing back the Tridentine Latin Mass, the red shoes and gold rings of high clericalism, residence in the Apostolic Palace seem to matter more than love, humility, and mercy... than Jesus.

It is disconcerting how easily religiosity – regulations, appearances, stifling traditions, deep-rooted prejudices and cynicisms – can entirely eclipse the heart of the message of our faith: unconditional love, radical inclusion, total forgiveness, an everlasting kingdom we are both longing and looking for and that is also already manifest... here, in this place, amongst us and within us. How easy it is to forget these realities, falling into the inertia, monotony, and apathy of everyday habits, mindsets, and glib materialistic worldviews.

And where do we fall short? There is much in the last year that has rocked our culture and society: one of the worst pandemics in history, exposure of the deep racial injustices, new ways of doing church, continually worrying signs of climate change. These things have all, like Peter's address to the Israelite crowd, been met with both denial and hostility, and yet also with acceptance and repentance.

During the media coverage before the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral service yesterday, there were various interviews from people who knew him well. In one of them, Revd John Sentamu spoke of the Duke's faith. How it had grounded him in his work and commitments: conservation work, science, and the many hundreds of charities he supported. How despite his royal status, his simple yet strong faith helped him be kind, humane and humble, showing interest in anyone regardless of religion or background.

But one thing Revd Sentamu emphasised was that the Duke had had to go through a difficult journey to get that place of spiritual contentment with his often-frustrating position as consort to the

monarch. We are all on journeys like this, wrestling with our own shortcomings, prejudices, disappointments – desiring to be further than we are on that Christ-like path to radical love and compassion. Prior to today's Gospel reading is the story of the Road to Emmaus. Unlike Paul's immediate and dramatic blinding revelation on the Road to Damascus, this far more subdued and dreamlike sequence where Jesus journeys with Cleopas and his companion – there is a gradual, slow, but no less inexorable change of heart before they reach their destination.

Today in this Easter season, my prayer in the light of Christ's resurrection – our own healing and restoration – and the high calling to inclusion, love, and healing we all here have, is that we may never lose heart. That despite all the grief and exhaustion around us, we may ever seek to proclaim the name of Jesus in London and to all nations of this earth. Amen.