

Easter Day 12 April 2020 – Long Easter Saturday

Readings: Acts 10: 34-43 Matthew 28: 1-10 Celtic Saint: Cuthbert

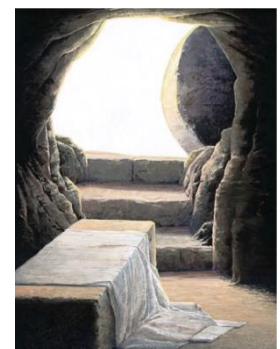
‘May we, like Cuthbert, bright star of the North, become your Easter people, O Christ.’ This is from the Easter Prayer inspired by St Cuthbert, last of our series of Celtic saints. (The prayer is on page 8 of the service booklet). Cuthbert lived from 640 to 685. He revelled in isolation, so today we may learn from his example of how to be ‘Easter people’. He was a monk at the monastery of Lindisfarne, an island only connected to the Northumbrian coast by a tidal causeway, but that was not isolated enough for him. He found his own tiny island, little more than a pile of rocks, in search of greater solitude. But that was still not isolated enough for him. He finally found isolation on the Inner Farne, an island properly in the North Sea. Here, he maintained his life of prayer with the sea raging around. He had previously lived a highly active life – from shepherd boy and soldier in his youth, to abbot and bishop, itinerant evangelist, teacher, spiritual guide and worker for reconciliation – but for this season solitude afforded him a life of devotion, stillness and union with creation and the Creator. He drew confidence that his faith was for the world to come as well as for this earth. He was one of Christ’s Easter people.



‘A long Easter Saturday’: that’s how someone described the feel of our current state of lock-down in devotional terms. Holy Saturday is, after all, a day of waiting and of preparation. We have had the emotional intensity of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, imagining ourselves present with Jesus at his Last Supper, through his betrayal, arrest, accusation, abandonment, torture, death and burial. We have Easter Day to look forward to, expectant of celebrating Christ’s resurrection. But on the Saturday, we pause and take a breath. Normally, in church, we do practical preparations – cleaning, flowers, altars and so on. We wait in tune with the events of the New Testament. This is the Sabbath day: Jerusalem is in lock-down. The gates are barred. No one goes in or out. Even in the city, only the short sabbath walk is permitted. The women who had accompanied Jesus – summarised by St Matthew as Mary Magdalene and ‘the other Mary’ – long to go to the tomb to see and to grieve there, but they have to wait.

Hold that moment, for a moment. Be there, at the gate, with the women, in the pre-dawn half-light. Feel the grief, the emptiness, the frustration. Then the guard knocks the back bolts and shoulders the gates open. They can pass through! They can at last do something, not much, but do what they can. But then, suddenly, an earthquake. Suddenly, an angel. Suddenly, guards petrified. The tomb stone rolled away. Jesus gone.

Matthew’s account gives us nothing of the women’s uncertainty: just the angel’s rapid and incisive instructions. One, don’t be afraid. Two, come and see. Three: go and tell. Tell his disciples: Go back to Galilee. He’ll meet them there. A moment later, Jesus is there himself, meeting them, and with the same instructions: don’t be afraid; go and tell; meet in Galilee. They worship him. The day has come and there is plenty of work to do, most unexpected work. The first thing is worship. These women are the first Easter people.



‘Meet me in Galilee’ was an important message for Matthew, the Gospel-writer. Galilee was home for most, if not all, of the disciples. It was where they had first encountered Jesus and spent time with him. At the beginning, Matthew (4: 15-16) had introduced Galileans (quoting Isaiah) as ‘people living in darkness’ and ‘living in the shadow of death.’ These are people who need a saviour. ‘The shadow of death’, in the Biblical mindscape, impinges on the whole of life: just taking examples from Psalm 107, it’s the hunger and thirst of the desert wastes; it’s the threat of captivity and enslavement by one’s enemies; it’s physical illness and bodily destruction; and it’s the deep waters of calamity. Jesus’ ministry in Galilee had challenged the realm of death. Now, through his own death and resurrection he is coming to give light and life to all, not only in Galilee, but Galilee is the perfect launch-pad. Meet me in Galilee, and become Easter people.

The Apostles’ Creed states Jesus ‘descended to the dead’ or, in the traditional language, ‘descended into hell.’ Some Christian traditions say this is where Jesus was on Easter Saturday, as 2 Peter 3: 19 puts it, ‘preaching to spirits long imprisoned.’ For the Greek Orthodox, this scene is the principal way of depicting the resurrection. Christ is shown, completely surrounded by his dazzling halo, having descended through deep darkness, trampling the gates of hell (a bit hard to see, at the bottom with the picture) with Satan bound beneath (even harder to see!) What stands out is the dynamic energy of Christ himself. Either side of him are the figures of Adam and Eve. Christ takes hold of each of them by the wrist and hauls them upwards out of their tombs and out of the darkness and towards himself. It’s not just a hand-up – this is the powerful grace of God in action. This is far beyond our capacity to help ourselves. He alone can save. Notice also as Jesus pulls Adam and Eve upwards, he also pulls them together. He gives new life individually, and he also reconciles them together, re-uniting fractured humanity and remaking human community. He creates a new people – Easter people.



Fresco from the Chora Church in Istanbul, Turkey. I was fortunate to visit this church just before the current travel restrictions came in (although the picture was under restoration).

It may feel like we are enduring a long Easter Saturday, stuck in the mode of waiting with our lives on hold and nothing we can do. And it is true we must just wait – but waiting is an important Christian discipline. For Easter people, the wait is imbued with faith and hope, and expressed in love. But we must never forget, Christ is truly risen from the dead. He has entered the realm of the dead. He has reached down into this realm of darkness and propelled us into the light. He has commanded us: Do not be afraid. He has even instructed: go back to your home. He has promised: I will meet you there. A day come will to go out again, to go into the world and make disciples, as he commanded his first disciples. In the meantime, we remain Easter people. Do not be afraid: he is risen from the dead!