

Evensong Sunday 18 May

The Dean considers the terrifying and amazing truth of the resurrection.

Daniel 6:1-23, Mark 15:46-16:8

The Lion Storyteller Bible has a great rendition of the story of Daniel and the lions. Let me share a bit with you...

The pit was dark.

The pit was deep.

The lions covered its floor like a shaggy growling carpet.

They leaped to their feet in a second when Daniel landed among them.

They licked their lips.

They showed their teeth.

Their eyes shone bright and fierce.

They opened their mouths and moved towards their dinner.

And then they stopped.

Shoo! Scat! Go away! Shouted a voice.

The lions' mouths snapped shut.

Their tails drooped.

And they whimpered away to the corner of the cave.

Slowly Daniel turned around and looked up
into the face of an enormous angel.

These words convey something of the horror of the pit
which Daniel, showing courage, trust and humility,
deliberately chose to enter.

They also remind us that encounters with God's messengers are nearly always
terrifying, not just for lions, but for humans as well.

The story of Daniel sets us up this afternoon for an even more familiar story,
that of the Sabbath morning after the death of Jesus,
when the women went to another cave and found it empty,
except for the presence of an angel,
an amazing, disconcerting, if not frightening,
messenger from God.

Today, we hear that story from the gospel of Mark.
You might not be aware that the end of today's reading is the end of Mark's gospel.
Mark does not recount any of Jesus' resurrection appearances,
he ends his gospel with the women,
terrified and amazed,
and running away.

There are two good reasons for Mark to end here.

Mark reminds us that the resurrection is both amazing and terrifying.
Amazing because it marks the turning point in history.
Terrifying because it demands a response from us.
The story ends here because Mark expected his audience to become the continuation of the story.
It is a story that expects, invites or demands, depending on your perspective, a response from you.

A response which is both personal and universal.

The story, which we share, is the story of the new Creation,
not just saving a few sinners from death,
but restoring the whole created order to relationship with God.

If we think that the resurrection is just about saving a few Christians from hell
we are deeply and profoundly mistaken.
It is part of God's universal plan.

Here in Bristol Cathedral, we are familiar with that plan, in which Christ
himself went down into the pit of Hell to rescue those who had gone before
him. I like to think that once he had done that, Hell was empty.
Because God's saving love is for everyone.
God's saving love is universal.

The cross itself is universal.

On the cross Jesus shows his solidarity with all victims,
but especially with the victims of the system of power
achieved through violence
which is the hallmark of human sin.

In recent months we have been made sharply aware
of the way in which sin plays out,
as we watch while Putin and Trump play power games with one another,
while men, women and children die in Ukraine and Gaza.
If, at some point, war in either of these places ceases,
we know only too well that history will be in the hands of the victors.
Whoever has the power will tell the story of evil overcome,
of injustice righted.

The resurrection, by contrast, is a unique and singular event that changes
everything and enables a different version of history.
Not history told by the victors,
but history told by the victim.

The resurrection story is ultimately a story of forgiveness.

It is a story about the breaking of the cycle of violence.

It is a story about new life made possible.

The disciples, intimately caught up in this story
were so transformed by it that they rushed to share it,
at first with one another,
then with the citizens of Jerusalem,
and ultimately with the whole world.

The world is a frightening place at the moment.

Most of us do not face the prospect of entering a den of lions
or descending into the pit of hell,
but we face our own challenges,

and we see the challenges facing our world.
We might be asking ourselves,
in response to events in Gaza, or to homelessness in our own city,
or the refugee crisis,
“what can I do?”
“How will I answer for my response to this suffering?”

Jesus tells us,
Be alongside me,
Be alongside the victims.

And if you are a victim,
If you are suffering,
Know that I am with you.
Know that we are one.
Know that my story and your story are the same story.

Let us continue in prayer...

For the victims of violence in our own day,
The children of Gaza
The elderly in Ukraine
The homeless in our own city
Those abused,
caught up in drugs or alcohol addiction,
the victims of wrongful conviction.

For the perpetrators of violence,
For those beguiled by the glamour of war,
For those corrupted by power,
For those conscripted into military warfare,
For all who benefit from the arms trade.

For ourselves and those around us,
When we are afraid of suffering or death,
When we turn away from the suffering of others,

When we hear your call but do not respond.
Lord, move through your world with grace and love,
Empowering and strengthening all who share in the story of your Son,
So that the story may continue, drawing others to you,
Until that time that humanity is reconciled and creation is restored,
In Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.

And so we sum up these, and all the prayers offering in this cathedral today, in
the words of the grace...