

Today's readings about resurrection strengthen us for the passions of the coming two weeks, as we follow Jesus life pouring out in love even as far as death. They remind us that the purpose, the outcome of all of this horror, for that is what it is, albeit dulled by familiarity, is the gift of life. It is the gift not just of life now, but the gift of life which is eternal.

Those of us who count ourselves Christians are those who have opened ourselves up to this gift of eternal life, bought at great cost: I'd like to spend a few minutes reflecting with you this morning with the guidance of our readings, exploring this gift what we do with it? And – perhaps this is my key question – is the world a better place with you in it, as a Christian? In what way is your faith a good thing not just for you but for the world?

As many of you know, I've just come back from South Africa, where I was able to put this question to the senior school assembly in Somerset College, one of our Coventry International Cross of Nails Schools. Is the world a better place, because you're in it, was my question for them. For many in South Africa, the role and responsibility of Christians in making the world a better place is still undisputed, even thirty years after the end of the struggle to bring down the apartheid regime. Christians were at the forefront of the movement for justice, and later for reconciliation. In truth, and Nitano is better placed to answer this than me, since 1994 it has been significantly harder for the church and even individual Christians to know what they are for – the central role of the church gave way to the role of the ANC, and the country has not necessarily been the better for it. My visit incorporated preaching in Cape Town Cathedral, leading a reconciliation workshop in a large township church in Durban, speaking at two Iftars and several other connections with established or potential partners in the Community of the Cross of Nails.

It's always fascinating to travel, and see how Coventry's story has an impact around the world. I've been doing some totting up, and it seems I've presented crosses of nails to 37 new partners, mostly in their own context, and visited over sixty others, to say nothing of other places I've been asked to speak about Coventry. Over one hundred places who take something from our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

So, coming back, what does it mean to you – and to me - to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

As it happens, our first reading today contains the very first verse that I ever underlined in my Bible. I come from a tradition when we used to underline verses where it felt as though God was speaking particularly to us, or where we recognised something very important we wanted to remember. I wonder if you could guess which verse I underlined? (Take a moment.) For me, it was a verse that described the experience of becoming a Christian, opening up my mind and heart to the reality of God and God's love for me. It was Ezekiel 37.5: *behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live*. It was a transforming experience, which I have never forgotten, and which I continue to live out every day. The reality of God's love for me – and in truth for all the world – was transformational to my late

teenage self. (Like being fitted with a new pair of glasses, walking home from the opticians; the move from black and white to colour tv.)

It's the same experience that is described in the gospel passage. The restoring of Lazarus to life is one of the most disturbing passages in the new testament. It's too much to get our head around. One of the films has this incredible shuddering gasp coming from inside the tomb as the dead Lazarus takes the first breath for four days "Lazarus, come out," Jesus calls. As he calls to all of us: come out of your tombs of death, and breathe the air of God's eternal life. Jesus cries out to a dead man. [cf the Matrix] And live as God wants you to, for the good of the world. Live as Jesus lived, for the sake of God's love for the world.

If you could only have two passages from the whole of the Bible, you could do worse than the two set for this morning. The old testament speaks of the restoration of all the people of God, the rebuilding of community from the dry bones of despair and defeat. The gospel builds on that its description of that reality at a very personal level.

Martha and Mary both cry out to Jesus with the same words - did you notice that in the passage? Take a moment to look and see! ... Both say, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." To Martha, Jesus responds with an extraordinary personal description, and an invitation to belief, to which Martha responds with one of the greatest affirmations of faith in the gospel, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This is the Christian faith, in four short sentences.

Mary is not looking for faith so much as for love. She uses the same words, but Jesus responds this time not with creedal statements but with love. The word used here in verse 33 and again in verse 38 is *mopsuesta*, boiling over. Jesus responds with his gut to the distress of Mary, and the apparent anguish of others present. And he weeps - the shortest verse in the Bible, and one of the most profound.

My wife Ricarda, who works in hospital ministry, has a way of reading this and the other famous passage involving these sisters, Mary and Martha, wondering if Mary was an adult with special needs. If you read the passages in this way, it makes sense both of Jesus heart response to Mary, and more rational response to Martha, both in today's passage and in the other story where Mary is commended for simply sitting at Jesus feet as Marth busies herself with the jobs that need to be done. Perhaps Mary actually couldn't have done the work, or grasped the theological truths affirmed by Martha – but her part was just as important. Everyone has their own way to serve Jesus. And we are all able to bring our honest questions of mind and heart – as my teacher in prayer, Alan Jones, used to say, he was longing for a way of believing that was *intelligent, passionate and honest*.

And so Jesus leads the way to the tomb, along with the professional mourners with all their noisy wailing, and performs the greatest of his signs, the defeating of death. This of course is exactly the Coventry story, that out of despair comes hope, out of enmity comes reconciliation, out of death comes life.

Christian Aid used to have a slogan, "We believe in life before death". Actually, we believe in life before and after death. And what Jesus says to the crowd about Lazarus, he says to us all – and we say in Jesus' name to the world. Look again at the reading in the leaflet, and hear God say it to you this morning ... "Unbind him, and let him go."

Jesus calls us each morning, every hour of every day, to come out of the tombs to which we retreat, where we hide ourselves away from the challenges and opportunities to follow him in the world and make his love known. He challenges us to be joined, like a mighty army, to those who would work for the transformation of this world for good ... not in Christian domination, but Christian service. (I had a disconcerting experience in South Africa, singing the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" for the first time for very many years – it was sung in a school perhaps in part in response to the Iftar celebration which I and others had participated in earlier in the week, and made me cringe. But what if Christians were once again known for the good that we do, the blessing that we bring to all. This is the faith we share here in this Cathedral, to live into God's light here in the heart of our city, not just for our own sakes but for the good of all.

"The foot bone connected to the, leg bone, the leg bone connected to the, thigh bone, the thigh bone connected to the, hip bone, now hear the word of the Lord ..."

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21