

I Peter 3:18-22

Shortly after midnight, on 28th December, 1694, Queen Mary II died at Kensington Palace. She was just 32, she had contracted smallpox. Her husband King William III was distraught and planned a swift private funeral. There was an outcry, Mary was popular, the nation wanted to mourn and William gave way. She was finally buried in March 1695. It was a bitterly cold day, the Thames was frozen, musicians struggled with the cold as they played for a funeral procession that marched from Whitehall to Westminster Abbey. And this morning you will hear a piece of music, composed by Purcell, for that funeral. *Thou knowest Lord, the secrets of our hearts.*

It is funeral music. A good choice for the first Sunday in Lent. Those of us marked with ash on Wednesday had the words *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*, said over us. It is what God said to Adam and Eve when sentence was passed in Eden for their sin. It was an echo of the funeral service earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. One of the old liturgies for Ash Wednesday pleaded with God to spare those that are penitent

Bless and sanctify these ashes that they may be a wholesome medicine to all them that humbly call upon thy holy Name

Ashes were not just a symbol of the grave, when these customs began you might have used ash as an alternative to soap. They are abrasive it can make you clean.

Do you see? On Wednesday we said something radical and disturbing. We died, we repented, we were washed, we changed. We face in a different direction today.

We are changed. Let's just explore that idea, with a little help from our second reading from I Peter. Our reading plunged us into the middle of a conversation

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all (I Peter 3:18)

But, if you want to know about a letter it is wise to begin at the beginning. I get letters that start 'Dear David, it was so good to see you...' I get others - Dear Rev Hole, (which is wrong on a number of counts) we invite you to an exhibition of vestments made entirely from hemp'. These letters are not the same. The way a letter is addressed is significant. I Peter begins,

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia...

Now, that is a very odd beginning indeed. Just occasionally, we get letters addressed to us in a way that supposed to remind us of something. A charity will write 'Dear Donor' as a way of telling us we have given to them before. If the Bishop writes to me 'Dear Dean Emeritus', I will know I have just been sacked. You can address a letter to confer a status. That is what is happening here. The letter is written to *the exiles*, or (closer translation) to *resident aliens*. It is the author is saying *you are people who do not quite belong; you are different*. More significantly these exiles live in something called *the Dispersion*. The Dispersion, also known as the *Diaspora*, is a technical term, it describes Jews living outside Israel. And that is odd, I Peter makes it sound as though it is written to Jews living outside Israel. It is not. This letter is

very clearly written to Gentiles, not to Jews. The letter begins by claiming that Christians are exiles, different from everyone else. And Christians are cuckoos in the nest, they have elbowed out the Jews, they are the new chosen race. Christians have inherited the old story and made it their own. It is a way of saying the Old Testament now belongs to us. I Peter is talking about *status*. Jesus has claimed us as his own and a story that stretches back to Abraham and Noah is now our story. We are changed. Whatever we thought about ourselves, Christ has made us something else, something more.

God has acted. Things are different. I Peter verse 3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope...

Because we are changed, I Peter tells us we ought to behave differently. That is what most of the letter argues. So, for example

Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair... I Peter 3:3

Hair braiding, I can tell you, is not a temptation that I have struggled with much. Keeping my tongue from evil (which the letter also demands), that has been more of a challenge. I Peter is determined that we are changed. We are changed, we must know that and we must live up to that.

But, and this is the big idea, the change is a gift. Suppose I really want to be slim and admired and suppose we overlook the fact that I have left it a bit late. I could stop eating quite so much cheese, I could buy shorts and run up Park Street. This is hypothetical, you will never see me run up Park Street in shorts. I could make myself slim. I cannot make myself admired. Admiration has to be given. In just the same way in lent we can learn to be penitent. Being sorry is a discipline. It is actually quite hard to be properly sorry. We can be sort of sorry, as in 'I am sorry you were upset when I shouted at you'. We can be extravagantly and meaninglessly sorry as in 'I know I shouted at you I am useless and a worm and you should ignore me'. Being properly and precisely sorry is much more difficult. I can work at that. I can however only be forgiven by you and by God. I cannot make it happen.

I Peter knows that. Remember, this is the letter that begins

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope

God has acted and we are changed. God has done this and there are three things we must notice. First, as our reading began

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all

God acts, but what we see is Christ suffering. I told you this letter is all about how we should behave - no hair braiding no evil tongue. The letter has been arguing that we should behave well

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse I Peter 3:9

We should do that even if we suffer for it. We might suffer for it, *Christ also suffered for sins once for all*. The first thing that is being said is that we suffer and so does Christ. Christ was no hero on a charger, nor a magician with a spell, Christ was one of us. That is important. If all I have to say about God is that God does something and I am changed then that can leave me feeling like a pawn on a chessboard. But, it is not like that. I have seen God act and what I saw was Jesus suffering. I know something about God and the way God loves me, I feel something. That is part of what I have to think about in Lent

There is more, I Peter then says that when Christ suffers, he suffers as, *the righteous for the unrighteous*. That is another, a second, thing to say about the cross. First, we see the love of God. Then, second, we see the justice of God. Make no mistake, evil is real and evil is dangerous. Evil was abroad in Parkland, Florida where schoolchildren were gunned down. That evil is scandalous and it cries out for healing. Blaming Nikolas Cruz or a weird, national obsession with guns will not suffice. There are families in Florida in agony and redemption needs to be met that need. The second point about what God does, in Christ, is that he takes our place, *the righteous for the unrighteous*. What happened in Parkland will only begin to be bearable when we can look at it and tell a story that is not just about senseless violence. That is what has happened on the cross, a different story was told about us. Not just love, but sacrifice.

And thirdly, as I Peter explains,

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit

Not just love, not just sacrifice, but a change. Where we saw death we meet life, despair gives way to hope; sin meets redemption. I Peter really wants us to know this and that is why there was a strange sentence in our reading

he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,

What does that mean? Well it is a bit mysterious and if you are at a loose end next month there are several PhDs to be done here, but it is probably a reference to a curious story in the Old Testament (remember this letter says the Old Testament is now *our* book). Genesis told a story about fallen angels who (in Noah's day) had children by the women of the earth. In Jewish literature, that turned into a great myth about the origin of evil spirits. I Peter knew that story and now it tells us that Christ triumphs even over those spirits. There is nowhere Christ's victory does not reach, no power of evil Christ has not overcome.

I know this has been a bit dense this morning. If you have been listening, you are in fact ready to start that PhD. I have not just been talking about I Peter, I have been talking about Lent. We turn Lent into a trip to the spiritual gym. It becomes something I do. Do that and you have Lent all wrong. We are changed, but it is God that does that. In Lent the story is not that I have done three good things and avoided a bad thing before teatime, but that God has given me hope. We do not come to the cathedral to be made slightly better; we come because we have been redeemed. In Lent we have time to repent and time to pray to the God who loves, acknowledge the Son who sacrifices himself and know the power of his victory. In Lent we can be changed.