

**Cathedral Choral Evensong**  
**Sunday April 19<sup>th</sup>**  
**Third Sunday of Easter**  
**Deuteronomy 7.7-13 & Revelation 2.1-11**  
**Canon Bruce Saunders**

The young man who shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 can have had little idea of the horror of events he was setting off across Europe. Tim Berners-Lee, for all his imagination, can't have foreseen the impact on your day-to-day life and mine when he invented the Worldwide Web. The teenager who first started littering sentences with 'like' can't have *like* known that it would go *like* viral!

Human history is full of examples of events, experiences, inventions that outgrow everyone's expectations. Christianity is one of them.

Even after that first Easter, when so many of the disciples had encountered the risen Christ, they had little idea of the immensity of what they had experienced. They thought of themselves as a kind of reformed sect within Judaism, they continued to worship in the Temple or the synagogue, kept the Jewish Sabbath, observed the Jewish dietary and hygiene rules. As we see in the letters of St Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, it was only later and gradually that they began to understand themselves as part of something new and different. They started talking about 'the Jews' – as a community of which they were no longer part; they talked of 'their synagogue', distancing themselves from the tradition, and at Antioch other people who noticed the difference started calling these Jesus-people 'Christians'. This new Gospel was very much bigger than they had ever imagined, far outgrowing its Jewish origins, erasing religious distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and many social and gender distinctions too.

As you might expect, those first Christians found it hard to adjust to this radically new perspective on life. And I think we still don't fully appreciate the revolutionary power of the Gospel with which many of us have become probably over-familiar.

The Easter Gospel may mean a great deal to us in terms of personal faith, as a sign of the power of God's and as a source of future hope for ourselves and those whom we love. But the Easter story is about rather more than what happened in a garden two thousand years ago. It's about what happened to the world when God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. There's a very exciting American theologian called David Bentley-Hart who is also a philosopher and a historian. He has examined the wider philosophical and political impact of the Christian Gospel. The Gospel, he argues, simply wipes out all the other ways in which human beings previously understood themselves and the world they live in; all those myths and legends that ancient people dreamed up to help them make sense of life, and particularly the understandings of power and success that they developed in order to cope with it.

He's talking about the ancient notions of humans as the playthings of the gods; and the notion that arbitrary and often cruel Fate has determined the outcome of our lives, do what we may; or the belief that, like characters in a Greek tragedy, something that we have done earlier in life or failed to do, or some flaw in our personality will come back to haunt and finally overwhelm us. These have all, at one time or another, been dominant ideologies. You'll recognise some of them from classical theatre, from Shakespeare and much later dramatists, operatic composers and philosophers, and they are full of blood, conflict, revenge and ultimate human helplessness. But these ancient and persistent notions, says Bentley Hart, have been rendered bankrupt by the Easter Gospel which shows us a God who has a radically different way of dealing with us and with his wayward creation – a way that is based on love, redemption and new beginnings.

The effect of this Gospel is to set us free from obsession with ourselves, obsession with self-blame, hopelessness, isolation and fear. We are not puppets, tragic victims, or pawns in some game of cosmic chess. Through baptism we are re-born into a new creation, 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven', and as

members of the Body of Christ commissioned to do Christ's work in the world today with confidence and love.

This Gospel reveals as fatuous and futile many of the values, ancient and modern, by which we live as a society. God looks at the military might of the Roman Empire and of our world today and says 'Do you want to know what real **power** looks like?' and he shows us a baby in a manger and a man on a cross. 'Do you want to know what **success** looks like?' And he shows us someone washing the feet of his friends. 'Do you want to know how to deal with **failure**?' And he shows us the risen Christ re-calling Peter from his shame and giving him a new purpose in life.

If only we would let it, the Easter Gospel really could turn the values of our world upside down. We pray for it constantly and possibly unthinkingly – 'Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. But when it comes to problems in personal relationships or problems of international politics or economic problems in our own society and across the globe, we still go for the old and discredited ways of handling things – discredited because history shows us they don't work – shouting, blaming, punishing, hurting one another and separating ourselves – we know they solve nothing. Isn't that what is meant by 'Those who live by the sword will (sooner or later) die by the sword' ?

Even in the early days of the Church when this Gospel was new, they fell back on old ways when things got difficult, as we heard in today's readings. The author of the Book of Revelation commends the Christians in Ephesus for their 'toil' and for the fact that they 'cannot tolerate evildoers'. *'It is to your credit that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate'*. Hard work, hatred and self-sacrifice - it sounds like the rhetoric of some fanatical extremist – but it's a recipe the world still falls back on all too easily. And behind it the forbidding shadow of the passage from Deuteronomy – *'If you heed these ordinances – (if you do what you're told) – the Lord will love you, bless you and multiply you'*. God will love you as long as you're good – that is, if you deserve it.

When you're talking to people about your faith (as I hope you do – for, if you don't, heaven help the future of the Christian faith and of places like this), I hope you can find the confidence to unleash some of the power of the Easter Gospel, for our Gospel is much more than a personal and private thing we happen to choose for ourselves, but is something dramatic and public and life-changing for the world.

And when you're discussing with people how you're going to vote on May 7<sup>th</sup> (as I hope you do – for heaven help our society if people like us, people with a vision and a Gospel mandate like ours, don't take the election seriously – for all the baffling media hype and contradictory messaging) – please keep your eyes open for parties or candidates who seem to share our view that there is a better way of doing things than trying yet again the tired old routines that we all know don't work.

I've been ploughing through the manifestos this week trying to work it out for myself.

- Wanting to be part of the world's most powerful (nuclear) gang – what one party calls 'Standing Tall In Europe' – sounds very much like the old notion that might is right and the bloke with the biggest stick wins. Is that where we truly believe strength and security lie?
- Threatening unemployed people with the removal of their benefit payments sounds an unlikely way of getting the best out of them. Threats never worked with my kids when they were young!
- And should we allow cities like this to reward achievement at one end whilst consigning an underclass of people who don't fit our model of success to the care of foodbanks charities?

Those are the kind of questions I've been asking as I read the manifestos and looking to see who is offering a more radical understanding of what true power and true success might look like and a more imaginative approach to solving problems? Given the available options, it's not a straightforward task. I haven't yet decided, and I wouldn't dream of telling you how to vote, but I hope you'll try to cast your

vote for the values of the surprisingly radical Easter Gospel that challenges so many of our values and assumptions and turns them up-side down.