The Bishop of Chichester

Easter Day Sermon

2022

**Preached in Chichester Cathedral**

So, let’s be a bit tabloid, and look at headlines about past, present and future.

“What I have written, I have written” – Pontius Pilate: “We have a Law” – High Priest Caiaphas & co; “Boris Johnson broke his own lockdown rules” – the Economist: “This is what I meant” – Jesus of Nazareth.

It might all sound a bit of a jumble, but there are common themes and they are about truth, justice, and reality.

Pontius Pilate is the representative of a despotic Empire that will crush resistance without mercy. Pilate represents the desire and capacity of human beings to control every aspect of life on earth. There is no accountability beyond ourselves. That puts justice at risk then, as it does today in Ukraine.

By contrast, the High Priest and his college of clergy live by a Law that they understand has been given to them by God. It is a Law which they have made more accommodating to suit their cultural and political context. That puts truth at risk. This kind of accommodation is also a dangerous temptation for the Church in our own time.

I am not going to comment on our Prime Minister’s breach of law and its penalty. But it is worth noting that laws, made by Parliament, do not belong to any Prime Minister: they are the laws of the realm.

These laws are not simply a set of rules, like you have for Rotary or the WI. The Law binds us to each other in public bonds of honour and respect. They are to be applied by the judiciary to all people equally. This is easier said than done, but it is how we attempt to sustain truth and justice, irrespective of status, wealth and power.

Today, however, Jesus of Nazareth points us to the vindication of the divine law of love, which will constantly disturb our notions of reality and the future.

We heard the first evidence of this law just now in the gospel reading. It was in the use of a name, when Jesus simply says, “Mary”.

This is the foundation of our relationship with God in the law of love. You are never a statistic or a type of person: you are always unique, known by a name given in the waters of the font as the seal of a personal, intimate and eternal relationship between you and your Creator.

What happened next in the gospel story disturbs Mary’s expectations and ours. She goes to give Jesus a big hug, but he distances himself from her. Her response is an expression of our deepest human instincts. We embrace who and what we love because we fear its loss. But something more mysterious is being revealed here. In his risen body Jesus Christ gives us sight of humanity perfected, what we shall be as the glorified sons and daughters of God in heaven. This is what he meant when he spoke about fulfilling the law and the prophets.

You will remember that in the 40 years in the wilderness, Moses goes up onto the mountain, which is swathed in cloud, were he meets with God. Like Mary Magdalen’s state of bewilderment in the garden, Moses is disorientated by being in the dazzling brightness of a cloud. Like her, he wants to grasp the situation, to get hold of what is happening, and he blurts out his request, “Show me, I pray, your Glory”.

It is such a human instinct, and one known to us today as we take out our iPhones to capture the moment with a photo or video recording. But the lesson for Moses, for Mary Magdalen, and for us, is that the reality of God cannot be grasped and possessed as though it were commodity bound by human laws.

Worship, adoration, and praise are the only possible response that we can make to the revelation of God. This is how we find delight in the law of love that is eternal and will guide us through this life, into the perfection of heaven.

One of the most imaginative and encouraging developments in the life of the cathedral this year has been the Art of Worship project. Drawing on the exceptional talents of Martin Earle and Jim Blackstone, it has invited us to explore the elements of sacred art. In their temporary workshop in the North Transept we have seen how artists in the 21st century can create with freshness and vitality the images of faith that resonate with a theological imagination that spans two millennia.

That skill and confidence in the work of sacred art has also been a powerful reminder of how Christianity came to be so deeply embedded in Ukraine and subsequently spread from there to Russia. The 10th century historian, Nestor, recounts how in 987 Emperor Vladimir sent envoys from Kyiv to explore the faith of his neighbouring countries. They dismissed Islamic faith because it forbade drinking alcohol and eating pork and they found no beauty in the churches of Germany. But in Constantinople the worship of God in the great church of Hagia Sophia overwhelmed them. “We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth".

This degree of bewilderment, like that of Mary Magdalen in the garden or Moses on Mount Sinai, ought to characterise how we experience the Christian story through the mystery of worship. It begins with the sense that here we are on sacred ground – on earth as it is in heaven. We are enchanted by the beauty of music on earth that echoes the song of angels and archangels. It is participatory, as we respond to the words and actions of sacred rites in which, by the work of God the Holy Spirit. the miracle of resurrection appears in the form of bread and wine which are the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself.

In the Dimbleby Lecture of 2002 the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, observed that “what is different about religious belief is its bold claim that there is a story of the whole universe without which your story won’t make much sense”. He went on to observe that the role of the Church of England is to be in communities of primary deprivation, “witnessing to certain non-negotiable things about humanity and about the context in which humanity lives”.

This observation points us to how the eternal law of love (a story of the whole universe) creates the bigger context in which we set the human laws governing earthly society and our individual lives. It is the law of Love that sets out the non-negotiable things about humanity, as made in the image of God, and destined for glory in life beyond death. So when confronted by war, acute economic inequality, or the deportation of refugees to Rwanda, which would be a shameful stain on our nation’s character, it is the law of love that challenges our conscience and calls us to the reordering of our priorities in the making and keeping of our nation’s laws.

Story-telling is another way to explain the law of Love, as C S Lewis found in his Narnia books. At the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Aslan the Lion, who had been sacrificed on the stone Table but has risen from death, explains what has happened. “If Jadis [the White Witch] could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.”

I am reminded of that when I look at an icon of the Resurrection in the Orthodox tradition. The doors of the underworld and the place of death have been broken down by the risen Christ. He as placed them over the gaping hole of darkness and standing triumphant on them he hauls Adam and Eve and all past generations out of the darkness into light and life. Death is working backwards. They stretch out their hands to him, as we do to receive communion. He grasps them with love and power and his hand, still bearing the imprint of the nail, liberates them from death to set them once more in the garden of paradise.

And so as the haunting Kyiv melody of the Contakion of the Dead also reminds us, it is from the grave that we raise the Easter cry of triumph as the vindication of the law of Love: Alleluia, alleluia! The Lord is risen: he is risen indeed.