

Easter Day 2021 – Rev Paul Day

Respair

A week or so back all the clergy and a good many readers in the Diocese gathered together online for a study morning on prayer. One of the themes for the morning was how we might experience prayer as joy, and as we were thinking about this we were introduced to a new word – or rather an old word that had fallen into disuse way back in the 15th century, but whose time has now come again.

That word is respair.

And the word means the return of hope after a period of despair or to have hope again. Its origins are from the Latin word sperare – to hope.

So let's think about respair.

Today on Easter Sunday ...

We can imagine Mary Magdalene walking slowly to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. Tearful, despairing, all hopes dashed. Wanting to do the last thing she could do for Jesus - the one who had given her purpose and meaning and healing. So much had been promised; yet so many hopes and dreams had been dashed.

We can imagine her confusion as she sees that the stone had been rolled away.
We can imagine her running in panic and terror back to Simon Peter and the others.
We can imagine her from a distance watching Peter and John taking a look inside the tomb, seeing the folded up grave clothes and then going back home in their confusion and half belief.
We can imagine her gingerly taking steps forward and bending over to look into the tomb and her surprise at seeing the angels and hearing their question
We can imagine her blurting out her response – “they have taken away my Lord”
We can imagine her turning round and seeing Jesus standing there but not recognising him
We can imagine her mistaking him for the gardener
And then we can imagine her despair slowly turning to joy as she hears him greeting her with that familiar greeting “Mary”, and then as she hears his command for her to tell the others, and then as she rushes back to them with that wonderful news “I have seen the Lord!”

That is surely what respair is.

For Mary and for the disciples hope has returned. The horrors of Good Friday are confined to the past. The reality of the resurrection means that there is a new future.

And this new future would be better than and different from the past. This would not be a return to the time when Jesus was with them in Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing. No, what lay ahead was something bigger and better, drawing on all the good things from

the past but adapting them and developing them with the help of God to address a new situation and a new purpose.

Over the next few weeks as we read through the gospel stories we will be reminded of the gradual realisation amongst the disciples that what was to come was huge, that they would all be involved in new and exciting ways but that Jesus would continue to be with them through the Holy Spirit - encouraging them, inspiring them and equipping them for the task ahead.

This hope from despair, this rekindling of hope, this respair, is surely the central message of the Christian faith – and one that we are called to witness to in our lives. Particularly perhaps in the weeks and months ahead.

I wonder if you can cast your mind back 15 months or so – to the beginning of the year 2020. Like any new year I guess we all had hopes for good things; hopes of happiness and well being; hopes of times to be spent with families, hopes of things to be done and places to be seen. Hopes for our own lives, the life of the church and the community and the life of the world.

But in the early months of the year it was as if those hopes were all dashed.

These past 12 months or so have for our nation, for our world and perhaps most painfully for ourselves and those we love been a time of despair.

So many of the norms of life have been turned upside down. So many things that we would like to have done have not been possible. All around there has been pain and sorrow. So many of those hopes from the start of the year have been unfulfilled.

I suspect we probably all know of people who have died from Covid; we probably are all too painfully aware of those – perhaps ourselves – who have not been able to be alongside our loved ones in their suffering. For each of us our lives have changed more than we could possibly have imagined. For each of us I am sure there have been times of despair and isolation and loneliness. Times when it seemed that hope had gone, that everything good about life had drained away, that the future looked unknown and uncertain and unwelcoming.

So can there be hope for the future?

We said earlier that hope from despair – respair if you like – is at the heart of the Christian message.

Throughout scripture – Old and New Testaments - we have the repeating story of God bringing good things out of bad. Of new life, of new beginnings, of new purpose.

Even as we read the Old Testament prophets with their seeming words of gloom and doom, we also hear words of hope. Words of hope painted in pictures – the desert bringing forth blooms, the blind seeing, the deaf being able to hear, the lame being healed. We see it in the story of the Exodus, the return from exile and in the vision at the end of the Bible in Revelation – “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

God, then, is in the business of renewing things. And its important to note that renewing things is different from throwing the old away and getting something new. Its about restoration, its about recycling if you like. Jesus himself said “I haven’t come to do away with the law and the prophets but to fulfil them”

So perhaps the message we can bring to the world this Easter – the message to our families and neighbours and friends – is that God will use our experiences of pain and hurt from this past year and shape something good from them. Just as he brought the good news of the resurrection out from the horrors of Good Friday, he will turn our sorrows into joy.

And how that can happen perhaps begins with us becoming people of the resurrection rather than people of the cross. By that I mean people who look for the potential of the future rather than those who only see what has been in the past. People who look for where the risen Jesus is taking them rather than those waiting at the tomb where his body was laid.

We’ve spoken a lot about this in recent weeks in relation to the churches here in Shirley. How we can learn from the past to live in the future; how we can leave some of the old ways behind, in trust that God will renew them and shape them for the future. And the wardens, readers and myself will be prayerfully thinking more deeply about these things over the next few weeks.

But we can also be people of the resurrection in our everyday lives, in the wider community. Rather than dwell on the misery and the pain of the last year, lets instead see the good things that have happened – the increase in community spirit, the growing neighbourliness in evidence, the recognition of who the key workers in our land actually are and carry those positives into the future. And let us use those kinds of things to build a better future than was the past.

Mary went to the tomb on that first Easter morning to anoint a lifeless and dead body with spices. She came away a changed person, having encountered the risen Christ in his renewed body – Christ who was no longer dead but fully alive.

As we ponder on the pandemic we can either dwell and linger on the things that we have lost, or we could trust the risen Christ to lead us on to a renewed future which will become better than the past. We can either look on the despair of what we have lost but what might have been or we can look on the respair – the return of hope for the future – and that which God will lead us into.

