

In the garden

Lichfield Cathedral, Easter Day, 21.04.19

Every Easter is a special occasion, but this Easter at Lichfield is particularly memorable for two reasons: it is the first Easter that we have celebrated under the magnificent sign of this hanging icon of ‘Christ, Crucified, Risen and Lord of All’; and it is the time when we are to complete our centenary remembrance of the First World War with the inauguration of the Peace Woodland in Beacon Park. The first points us to the very heart of our faith; the second tells us how that faith speaks into the sorrows and the hopes that we all carry with us as human beings. How do these connect?

In March 1925, Rudyard Kipling – who had lost a much-loved son in the Great War – paid a visit to war cemeteries in France. The following month, he published one of his finest short stories, telling in a restrained and enigmatic way the quest of a British woman, Helen Turrell, to find the grave of the young man Michael Turrell, killed on the Western Front. As a respected single woman, she had always pretended that Michael was her nephew; at the end of the story we realise that he was in fact her illegitimate son. But we realise much more too – here are the final lines of Kipling’s Story:

A man knelt behind a line of headstones – evidently a gardener, for he was firming a young plant in the soft earth. She went towards him, her paper in her hand. He rose at her approach and without prelude or salutation asked: ‘Who are you looking for?’

‘Lieutenant Michael Turrell – my nephew’, said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life.

The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown grass toward the naked black crosses.

‘Come with me’, he said, ‘and I will show you where your son lies.’

When Helen left the Cemetery she turned for a last look. In the distance she saw the man bending over his young plants; and she went away, supposing him to be the gardener.

Kipling’s story is a powerful exploration of loss and search, of pretence and truth, of confusion and hope. And, of course, its last lines take us right back to the first Easter morning, where Mary Magdalene meets her risen Lord in the garden. That encounter is shaped by three movements on Mary’s part: she bends down; she turns round; and she sets off. What does each of those mean for us in our confused mixture of sorrow and hope?

First, Mary bends down. She does this in order to look into the open tomb. This is a gesture of exploration, and it is a measure of her strong impulse to search for her beloved that Mary has the courage to do this. Any tomb would be in her time, as still for us, a place of unknown fear – still more might an open tomb be a place where all the powers of darkness could gather; a focus of the nameless anxieties which can dominate our lives.

When she looks into the tomb, Mary sees two angels seated, one at the head and the other at the foot. This is an extraordinary image: John is evoking the mercy seat in the temple, where two cherubim sat above the ark, the sign of God’s presence with his people. Into the holy of holies in the temple, only one man, the high priest could enter, only once a year, only after the most elaborate rituals. For anyone else, to step inside meant death.

Yet here is Mary, a layperson not a priest, a woman not a man, whose sense of quest is so strong that she fearlessly looks into the most holy place. So far from this bringing death, it is new life for her. In the religion of the gospel, the peace and joy of God are freely offered to all, and the nameless terrors of death are swept aside. Because Christ is risen from the dead, there is nothing in this world more powerful than the love of God, and whoever we are we need have no fear. Like Mary, we can pursue our quest for meaning and purpose with absolute confidence that ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord’. In the darkest moments of our lives, when the grief of bereavement overwhelms us, the terrors of the night attack us, the prospect of illness and incapacity dispirits us, the injustice and violence of the world make us despair, here is what to do: like Mary, look into the darkness, and find mercy there.

Then Mary’s second move is to turn. Actually, if you read the gospel text carefully, you will see that the word ‘turn’ is used twice. To begin with she ‘turns around’. Why does she do that? The medieval French theologian Jean Gerson says that it was because the two angels had spotted the one standing behind Mary, and that made them stand up; surprised by their movement, Mary turned around to see what was there. It’s a bit of a pantomime moment – ‘He’s behiiiiind you!’, we can hear the angels calling. And as in any pantomime, there is confusion: Mary does not at recognise who this man is. But then, after a classic bit of conversation at cross-purposes when like Helen Turrell, she supposes him to be the gardener, Jesus calls her name, and again Mary turns and calls him, in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni’.

This second turn is no pantomime gesture of confusion. Indeed, it is not a physical movement at all, because Mary is already looking at Jesus. Rather, it is the facing of her whole being towards one who calls her name. Jesus is not a gardener but a shepherd, one who knows his flock, and they know him and hear his voice. Mary has been found, and in the security of that knowledge she turns to Christ at the deepest level of her being.

And that is where we are at this Easter morning. In a few minutes, we will be renewing our baptismal vows. The Dean will ask you, ‘Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?’ And when you reply, ‘I turn to Christ’, you are doing just what Mary did in the garden: speaking from the heart of the love which has found you in Jesus Christ.

This love is the deepest level of who we are, and we can never forget that. Three weeks ago, I spent a few days in Manchester as part of a dialogue of Christian priests and Jewish rabbis on the theme of ‘remembering’. It was a fascinating conversation, but what sticks most in my mind was something that Archbishop Suhail of Jerusalem said. He was speaking of his mother, whose last years had been blighted by severe dementia. She would forget what she had just said, what she was just doing, even who she was. But, he said, one thing she could never forget was her favourite prayers and hymns: ‘She always remembered the love of God’. As we commit ourselves afresh this Easter to the Lord who commits himself to us, let our prayer be this: that we never forget the love of God which has found us in Christ and called us by name like Mary.

But Mary is not allowed to cling to the Christ to whom she has turned. One further movement awaits her: she must set out, so that she can tell the disciples what she has seen and heard. Notice what John is saying here, in his subversive way. The men have disappeared off the scene at the end of the second paragraph – they could not understand the scripture, so what did they do? They went back home to have a cup of tea.

The men went away baffled; it took the woman to tell them what was going on. For this, Mary Magdalen has been rightfully hailed in the Greek East as *isapostolos*, ‘equal to the apostles’, and in the Latin West as *apostola apostolorum*, ‘apostle to the apostles’. You may notice a gender dimension to what I have said; but this is not all about point-scoring in the battle of the sexes. The underlying point is, that in the society of Mary’s time women were comprehensively subjugated; in particular their ability to serve as witnesses was disregarded. Yet it is a Jewish woman who becomes the first to witness to the most important single truth in human history: the raising of Jesus from the dead, the start of the new age, the final defeat of the powers of death. It is through those whom the world discounts, those whose voices are ignored, those on the edge – through their voices that our God chooses to communicate his saving truth to all. And that is a constant reminder to all of us, that it is in the forgotten places, the disregarded people and the unexpected stories of our own time that we should expect to find signs of hope. And find them we will, however discouraged we may feel at times; because Christ is truly risen from the dead, and all things are being made new in him, beginning with you and me.