

Bishop Michael’s Easter Day sermon

If Laura Kuensberg, the current affairs journalist of the BBC were enabled to ask two questions of the risen Jesus on the day of his Resurrection, what do you think they would be? That’s one for you to ponder. More importantly, if you were given the opportunity to ask two questions of the risen Jesus what would they be? What would you want to ask about? What are the deepest questions of your heart to which you’d like to receive Jesus’s answer?

I ask this, because questions lie at the heart of the account of Jesus’s Resurrection that we listened to this morning. John’s Gospel tells us of the risen Jesus’s encounter with the first witness to his rising from the dead, his friend, Mary of Magdala. Mary has come early in the morning to the garden in which Jesus’s tomb was found. This is not just any old garden. As he offers his account, John invites us to think about another garden, the oldest of gardens, the mythic Garden of Eden found at the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, In the scriptures, that garden of creation also contained a man and a woman, Adam and Eve. Adam was set there to tend and keep it. He was the first gardener. It’s no accident that John tells us that when Mary meets the risen Jesus she ‘supposes him to be the gardener’. John is telling us that Jesus is the new Adam. His Resurrection recreating the whole world anew.

The account of the first creation told in Genesis contained questions. Sadly, not the kind of questions that any of much like hearing. In Genesis, Adam and Eve have sought to take control of their own destinies with disastrous consequences. They’ve turned away from God and sought to make themselves number one, to place themselves at the centre of the creation God has made for them – a course of action whose peril they’ve only too quickly discovered. In shame they go into hiding. A hiding revealed by the first question God asks in the whole Bible – ‘Where are you?’ As they recount their self-centredness and its consequences, God asks them in sorrow a second question ‘What have you done?’ How have you made such a mess of this beautiful and wondrous world I made for you to live in?

It was to redeem and renew this fallen world that God sent to us his Son. On his cross, Jesus stretched out his arms wide to us in love, taking onto his shoulders all our self-centredness and pride, all our desires and ill-fated schemes designed to make ourselves number one and that wreck every time the beauty for which we are made. As he rises from the dead Jesus triumphs over these things and becomes the new Adam, offering us a second chance, a new beginning, the possibility of living afresh with God as the people we were created to be. The first person who is witness to all this is Jesus’ friend Mary. Two questions follow but they’re not asked by Mary. They’re asked by Jesus. These aren’t the questions of recrimination that were spoken in the first garden ‘Where are you? What have you done?’ The questions Jesus poses to Mary have a very different tenor. They are ‘Why are you weeping?’ And ‘For whom are you looking?’ These questions aren’t asked impersonally, in the abstract. They’re asked in the context of a deeply personal encounter where the risen Jesus speaks directly to his friend by name – ‘Mary’ he says. Jesus greets his friend in full recognition of her and of all that she is. In turn Mary is able to meet Jesus, to name him and encounter him for all that he is in the fullness of his risen life. ‘Teacher’ Mary says. And from this meeting and mutual encounter Mary is equipped to go out and tell others of what she has seen and understood. Mary is the first witness to the resurrection.

Just as Jesus asked his questions deeply, personally to Mary on the morning of that day when the world was remade afresh, so he asks the same questions to us today. By name he asks us ‘Why are you weeping?’ We only weep for that which touches us most deeply, for the concerns that go right to the very depths of our hearts. The risen Jesus asks us, what is at the very centre of our lives. Who are you? What are you all about? What’s most important to you? What is it that most grieves you? It’s in these things that Jesus wants to meet us and to bring to us his balm.

For whom are you looking? All of us are searching in our lives for that which will make us complete, bring us home, fill us with wholeness and integrity, enable us fully to be the people we were created to be, to fill the God shaped space that lies at the centre of every human heart. Like the first Adam and Eve we can seek to fill that hole with other stuff – our schemes, our stuff, our self-made security – all designed to satisfy that space but that never really work. A wise person said many centuries ago ‘Oh Lord you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you’. The risen Jesus invites us to find in him the one for whom we are looking. To know his presence, his peace, his love, his life, his rest. To find in him the one who alone can truly satisfy.

All this is to invite us into a whole new world; a world recreated, a world made new. It’s to invite us to enter this world that the risen Jesus meets us, greets us by name and asks us his two questions today. Why are you weeping? Jesus asks us to meet him in the very fullest depths of who we are – in all our hopes and fears, our dreams and concerns. For whom are you looking? Jesus invites us to find in him the one in whom our deepest longings can be satisfied. So come, let’s meet and receive the risen Jesus into our lives today. And having met him, let’s be witnesses to him – in our lives transformed, our hearts changed, as the new creations we are enabled to be. For this is the good news for which our world longs.

A very Happy Easter to you all.

Amen.