Bishop Ruth’s sermon for the Chrism Service, April 2022

Called to Endure… Called to Hope

Thank you!!

* For the personal encouragements
* For sharing your stories
* For sharing your pain
* For navigating your way through uncharted waters
* For your faithful endurance

As we enter Holy Week, we have moved from the welcome procession of Palm Sunday onto the pilgrimage way of the cross. In the last couple of years that pilgrimage has been marked in new ways with that first lockdown when we filmed in isolation from our gardens, placed palms on our doors, and waved from a distance. The walking of the way to the cross was a challenge. Asking a lot from our emotional reserves. I remember last Good Friday phoning 3 of you who had experienced personal trauma and loss that Holy Week.

Yesterday I joined others on a hill above Taunton to dedicate the three crosses which stand there overlooking the town. We were at the UK’s Hydrographic office where for the last 50 years these crosses have been raised during Holy Week by the small Christian fellowship that meets there. Ministers of all denominations, lay and ordained, joined them to remind ourselves of the way of the cross and to pray for Taunton and the world beyond.

My son Jonathan and I arrived a little earlier yesterday to have a look at some of the very special charts held in the archives of this little-known naval base. They were the records kept by Frank Worsley, chief navigator on the Endurance expedition to the Antarctic. Just a few weeks ago, that vessel, Endurance, was found on the Antarctic seabed within 4 miles of Frank Worsley’s last known reading.

Worsley, Ernest Shackleton and the others left 100 years ago on a journey of discovery, to chart the way across the Antarctic to the South Pole. They didn’t reach the pole but their journey was a remarkable one of endurance, their ship aptly named! No one was lost and much was discovered along the way.

The charts, reconstructed by Worsley on his way home from his notebooks, showed us some amazing details. Pencilled remarks about the change of sea colour from blue to dark green; snow petrels, whales and penguins spotted; flocks of birds moulting; and glacial mud or shells found when taking lead weight soundings.

An amazing journey undertaken where the goal was not reached but new discoveries were made. As we enter this Holy week we recognise something of that journey as ours too. One of endurance. One which took us to new places, uncharted waters. One which called us to draw on all our spiritual, physical and emotional reserves.

Two thousand years ago, Christ made such a journey and we remind ourselves of it today as we renew our vows to follow Him, serve Him and minister to the Church and to the world.

This journey, taken each year in the Christian calendar, mirrors the experience of Christ and is lived out for each of us in unique and different ways. We share the same world in which we live but our personal experience of it will vary. And yet we are all called to both faithfully endure and to live in hope.

Paul’s words to the Philippians, which is our Dwelling passage for this year, calls us to ‘Rejoice!’ whether we feel like it or not. Anxiety and worry need to be put in perspective. Yes, there are times of plenty and times of want but whatever our circumstances we are encouraged to be content, recognise God’s presence and peace and thus rejoice. When it is tough, he urges them to ‘keep on doing the things they have learned and received and heard and seen’. And to do so by not dwelling on the things that have gone wrong or the evil experienced but rather to think about those things which are ‘true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise’.

Easy words? At a moment when our world appears to be on the brink of another conflict? When the unthinkable happens? A virus has affected us physically and impaired our spiritual and emotional strength too?

Sometimes it has felt as if we have clung on by our fingertips doesn’t it? It is in those moments that I have remembered these words from Philippians and heard the echoes of our brothers and sisters in Zambia… ‘God is good, all the time. All the time…God is good’.

*‘Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice.’*

Of course things have been lost. Some of our most faithful folk have lost their lives in this pandemic and gone to be with their Saviour. Some have not returned to worship in our churches even though they long to because they need to take care against the virus. And some have not returned because they have lost the habit.

This Easter I want to encourage us to re-set. To rediscover our purpose as Christians, called to worship God, to be Christ-centred and Jesus-shaped. Where possible we shall be throwing our doors open this Easter day as we have today. We shall still need to take heed, to have an eye to the vulnerable, to ensure we include all whether present physically or not. But let us ensure we speak out the message of hope that Christ offers us all. One of love, forgiveness, mercy, welcome, grace.

Even as we embark on yet another challenging stretch of the journey; where finances are tight, fuel and food are pushing up inflation; where the war in Ukraine sets family and neighbour against one another; we do so in the hope of the Easter message. Christ’s coming into the world to be one of us; who kneels at our feet to wash away the grime that clings to us; speaks of the service to which we are called. This is a message to proclaim from the hilltop above Taunton.

In recent days I have been reflecting on the question that Ian, our DBF Chair shared at Diocesan Synod the other week. ‘What have you got in your hand?’ This is the question that God asked Moses when he met Him in the desert and called him to lead the people from Egypt, to go and worship God on His holy mountain.

Moses felt a reluctant leader, he didn’t wish to confront the Pharaoh, was scared to speak truth to power. God didn’t offer him any additional resources other than what he held in his hand, his staff. It was that staff which was utilised during the extended series of plagues and the protracted departure of the Israelites. A humble object.

As Ian spoke of this story, I was nursing my own broken staff having dropped it a few days earlier. Thankfully, one of our wonderful clergy, Bruce, took it away and mended it using his new skills of woodcraft, picked up during lockdown! What a tale of renewal and resetting!

God’s purpose for Moses was to bring freedom from slavery to His people. God’s purpose for Jesus was to bring freedom from sin to each of us. In our Gospel reading this morning, we have heard again the words from Isaiah, the agenda set for Christ’s ministry. As Jesus took the scroll in his hand He took up that purpose to which He was called, even then preparing the way for His walk to the cross.

Are we prepared to do so too? Taking in our hands whatever God has given us, however broken we may feel it to be. God’s abundance will make good however weak our resource.

*‘Hope of our calling: Spirit-filled, unbound,*

*Old joys remembered and new purpose found,*

*Our call refreshed by sacrament and word,*

*We go in peace to love and serve the Lord’*