

31st March 2024

Easter Day, Festal Eucharist

Mother Emma

Looking through my Easter material this week, I found a photograph I had taken from the Vicarage garden during the very first days of the 2020 Covid lockdown – a shot of St Mary Abbots' spire rising above trees and shrubs covered in different-coloured blossom. I had sent it as an Easter email to members of the church council, entitled, "St Mary Abbots in lockdown" – a sign of hope that, despite the church being locked, and all of us confined to our homes, the spire and the spring flowers reminded us of God's glory and our call to worship him with joy on Easter Day. This year, people are commenting, sometimes with some anxiety, on the early arrival of the blossom and spring flowers, but whenever we encounter their uplifting beauty, it is hard not to be seized with a sense of hope and new life at these signs of the return of summer.

Since time immemorial, humankind, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, has gathered at this time of year around the Spring Equinox, to celebrate and give thanks for the lighter days and the first signs of spring, with all the promise they bring of warmer and brighter times to come. The secular symbols of Easter, embraced by those of all faiths and none, the flowers, bunnies, eggs and baby chicks, also reflect this sense of hope created by the coming of Spring. The promise of new life can bring joy out of sorrow and light out of darkness. Most of us, at one time or another, will experience a sense of new life, whether physical or emotional, connected with new places or situations or relationships, or in finding forgiveness or closure for painful past events.

Perhaps I could share with you my most vivid and concrete gift of new life, which followed a virus which started as I completed my university finals, leading over the next few years to kidney failure. At the age of 26, by then on daily dialysis, I received a kidney transplant, donated in the midst of terrible grief, by the parents of a young man of 21, killed in a motorbike accident. For me, it was truly the start of a miraculous new life, as I was able to forget the dialysis, return to full time work and even have two healthy children, now, as you know, in their twenties. The abundant generosity of my donor's family in the midst of appalling grief are always on my heart when, as we do today, we reflect on the greatest gift of new life, given sacrificially to humankind by Christ on the Cross.

The narrative of Christ's Resurrection is, of course the climax of the Christian year; it is the very foundation of our faith. As Pope John Paul II declared, "*We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song.*"

There is an important difference between the new life celebrated by people everywhere as they rejoice in the coming of Spring, and the new life remembered at Easter by Christians across the world. The Paschal, or Easter candle, lit last night from the Easter Fire, burns today in the church as a symbol, not of a cyclical new life, a life which will run its course, passing through summer and autumn back into winter, but of a new life promised to us for all eternity as Christ has opened to us the gates of heaven. But this is not to say that the new life we celebrate today is only a promise for when we die, and that we should simply sit and wait for our own Resurrection.

The readings today and in the weeks ahead show us new life and redemption being given even to the disciples who had run away and abandoned him.

Today we have heard the story of Mary Magdalene, a woman who in the first century would generally have been discounted as a source of sensible information; a woman healed by Jesus from a crippling illness identified as demon-possession, now made the "*apostle to the apostles*", the messenger and first witness of the glorious news of the Resurrection. Christ stretches out his arms to all, the weak, the marginalised, the powerless, the doubting.

Even here on earth, each of us is constantly offered the chance of new life and redemption from our failings and our fears, our anxieties and our limitations. Every Christian is offered the chance of new life in Christ through the waters of baptism.

We shall shortly be moving to the font, to bless water to sprinkle upon us all, so that each one of us can hear again and remember the vows we made – or which were made for us – at our own baptism; vows in which we put aside the self-orientation common to all humanity and turned to Christ, submitting ourselves to his Lordship and promising to following him.

It is not only Christ who rises on Easter Day, but we who rise with him as Easter people to serve God *here* in the world by living out that new life of hope and love, demonstrating like the spring blossom a promise of things to come. Of course we continue to live in a fallen world, a world tragically scarred and darkened by grief and violence and pain, by terrifying conflict, sickness and climate change, but here and there, a glimpse of Christ's promise of new life revealed in kindness, generosity, hospitality and self-sacrifice can offer others a glimpse of Easter joy and glory.

Perhaps we can inspire and encourage others to discern the quiet stirrings of God's love and mercy which lie deep within the human heart, and which call us all to live Christ's risen life. As we work together to create a fairer society, a more peaceful world, greater respect and justice between individuals, groups and nations, we can play our part as Easter people to reveal a new life, a foretaste of that eternal life to come, in which all people can declare together, "*Alleluia is our song.*"