

## Easter Day 2020

Fr Peter Groves

At some time or other, it has happened to us all. Something has gone wrong, perhaps we have good reason to be sad, perhaps it's just been one of those days, perhaps we've been feeling down for a while without really knowing why. We're certainly rather fed up, we'd rather not say hello let alone engage in conversation, and then the awful realisation dawns: we are being approached by someone we know to be relentlessly, almost pathologically, cheerful. This is absolutely the last person we would like to encounter given the way we feel, and yet we know that we will now have to endure at least a few moments of catastrophic attempts to change our mood, disastrous and utterly inept bonhomie packed full of clichés and entirely unfunny efforts to be funny. If we escape the situation without punching our acquaintance on the nose, then we will surely have triumphed.

We have all endured something like this. I expect many of us have been guilty of it as well. I remember seeing a friend across the quad at New College when I was an undergraduate. He wasn't looking his normal self, and I uselessly ventured "Cheer up, it might never happen", only to be told that his longstanding girlfriend (and, we all assumed, fiancé) had just left him for his best friend. I don't think I ever used that particular phraseology again.

I'm not sure I could ever have predicted beginning a sermon, or reflection, on the day of Easter in this manner. If Easter is not about joy, then what on earth is? If ever it were true that, just for one day we should forget all our worries, then is not Easter that one day? Well, yes and no. At the moment, it doesn't help in the slightest to pretend that our current circumstances are other than grim. The air is filled with frustration and stagnation at the very least, and for many it is worse: isolation and loneliness and fear and loss and death conspire to surround us and crowd out the joy we are supposed to feel. The worst thing that the Christian church can do in this

situation is bounce up to the world around it with a rigidly immovable plastic smile, and say “Cheer up”.

But at the same time, the crisis in which we find ourselves might help us position our celebration of the resurrection a little more appropriately than can sometimes be the case. It’s too easy to celebrate Easter with a bang, and then to go back to normal, as if we are partying on our birthday or marking a sporting triumph. The resurrection of Christ is not something which has only just happened, not a flash in the pan which momentarily grabs our attention. It is because the resurrection has already happened, that the truth of God’s triumph over death is real, that we celebrate Easter in the first place. The fasting and preparation of Lent, and the ritual drama of Holy Week, are deliberately liturgically exaggerated to draw attention to this truth. If we were waiting for something unexpected, then all we need do would be wait. As it is, we engage in memory and remembrance so that we can better understand what is already true.

And what is already true is that Jesus Christ is risen. Not that Jesus Christ has risen, not that a particular turn of events took place (although those events are important), but that in and through those events God transformed and continues to transform the world. It would be wrong to suggest that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not about us. It is about us, but it is not first about us. Rather, it is first about God, about who God is, about what the love of God means. That it means the defeat of death and the victory of hope, is what makes the resurrection something which is about us. The love of God is the divine nature, it is nothing other than what it means to be God. But it is that love, that divinity, which creates us and makes us who we are, and the real joy of Easter is the recognition that nothing about human pride or fear or weakness can contain the love which brings light from darkness, and makes something where there was nothing.

And so, even as we mark our frustration and our separation and our sadness at not being together, at not gathering to be part of our own worshipping community at the

very time when we long to offer that worship, we are still the people of God. We are still an Easter people, those who are confronted with the bewildering truth of love in the mystery of the empty tomb. Jesus appears to his disciples, to those who are his followers, those whom he calls friends. As disciples, they continue to learn, and the resurrection stories in the gospels show us over and again that this process of learning does not come to an end with that first Easter day. Even as we desire to be the people of God once again, God himself instructs us that we already are that people. God prods us, nudges us, pushes us towards the greater truth: that Christ is risen, whether or not we are there to take notice or to celebrate together. The victory of God's love is our victory to share, but only because it is God's victory first of all, that which belongs to God and hence that which God alone is able to give.

Perhaps, rather than telling ourselves to "cheer up", we ought to look again and again at those resurrection stories. The disciples find the tomb empty but have no understanding of what has taken place. Mary Magdalen does not recognise Jesus, she needs him to call her by name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus need the breaking of the bread to open their eyes to the presence of love incarnate who is sharing their table with them. From these confusions, from this puzzlement, grows the greatest earthly phenomenon the world has ever known – the church of Jesus Christ. It is the power of the resurrection, the infinity of God's love, which gives life to the church and faith to the people of God. It is the truth of the resurrection that we celebrate this Eastertide, and it is the hope that truth begets, which is God's gift of love to every one of us.