

Easter Day 2023

What's the worst that could happen? It's a common phrase, usually used to indicate the fact that it's fine to go ahead and do something. What's the worst that could happen? It's also a rhetorical question. We are not actually intended to spend time considering what in fact is the worst that could happen. And it's also a question we tend to apply to the unfamiliar, or that for which we are unqualified. For example, our church sound system is notoriously unpredictable – I might try to fix it, what's the worst that could happen? Well, presumably the worst that could happen is that I might electrocute myself whilst also starting an electrical fire which burns down the church. But that wasn't really the response I was looking for.

What's the worst that could happen? I suppose the specific answer probably depends on one's situation. Imagine you were the printers uniquely tasked by the Royal Family with printing and supplying their official copies of the Book of Common Prayer. Presumably the worst that could happen would be to get the name of the monarch wrong. Well, very recently Cambridge University Press didn't do exactly that, but they

did fail to notice that the ruler who ratified the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1571 was not our late Queen Elizabeth, but her Tudor predecessor Elizabeth the First. And so substituting the name of that Queen Elizabeth with our now King Charles means that they have described him in terms which are just a little diplomatically embarrassing – Our Sovereign Lord Charles, by the grace of God of England, France and Ireland, King. One can just imagine the office scene: oh, this is easy, we'll just do a "find and replace" on the name Elizabeth. What's the worst that could happen?

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ offers a rather less frivolous take on that very question. The human race, so sure of the truth of violence, so certain that strength and domination and the ability to kill and to control are what matters in this world, so casually presumptive of a God who rules by vengeance, instead finds itself confronted with Jesus of Nazareth. No monarchical splendour there, no pomp, no power, no military might. Just another subversive preacher, a religious rabble rouser, easily disposed of. We've seen so many like him before, we'll just get rid of him. What's the worst that could happen?

As we know, in this particular case, the answer is, *that* is. That is the worst that could happen. Humanity, straining constantly beyond itself to

know the mind of its creator, peering ever more intently into what it thinks is the mystery of the divine, finally comes face to face with the reality of perfect love, with the truth of God himself in this awkward Galilean who talks so relentlessly of selflessness, of forgiveness, of grace. And face to face with love, humanity acts to extinguish it, to silence the word itself, to snuff out the fire which gives light to the world of creation. Humanity meets its God, and it puts that God to death. That is the worst that could happen.

And yet today, in the triumph of the resurrection, we are forced to re-examine that question. We are required to acknowledge the ludicrous claim that the one we have put to death is the one who alone gives life. We are obliged to come to terms with the truth that, in the words of Rowan Williams, our victim is our hope. The object of our envy and hatred, the sufferer who endures our betrayal, our blows and our torture is the one who returns them with love so perfect, with self-giving so complete that it can only be divine, it can only be that which cannot be contained or controlled by the dynamics of power in which we have placed so much faith. The whom we have put to death is the one whose life is the origin and the fullness of creation, a life that cannot be snuffed out or entombed in the cold certainty of judicial murder.

Our victim is our hope. The worst thing that could happen is the worst thing not for Jesus the victim of our cruelty and our hatred, but the worst thing for cruelty and hatred themselves, the worst thing for the presupposition of violence and power and greed, for self, and selfishness and pride, the worst thing for all those things which we thought were most important. And so the worst thing that could happen is in truth for us the best thing that could happen. Our victim is our hope because our stupidity and fearfulness and betrayal of God's love has become the remaking, the transformation of what it means to be human, has opened up the possibility of the new life in which we walk, because we have been united with the perfect death of the one who loves without plan or purpose or gain, who loves without end, without limit, because love is what he is, because ends and limits are necessarily things of which he can know nothing.

Our victim is our hope. And what this means, is something which for us is wonderfully, gloriously and relentlessly unsettling. What's the worst that could happen? It's the best thing. In the worst things that we do, in the moment of greatest despair, in the darkness, the absence, the emptiness of the very depths of our lives, in the worst, is the life-giving presence of God. When life is at its lowest, when God seems to be so completely distant, salvation itself is present with us. To be sure, its

presence is likely unseen, unrecognised. The tomb is empty, there is nothing to see. If we peer in to take a look we are greeted by absence and by darkness. We see, or we think we see, the worst. But the worst is actually the best, this absence and this darkness are the hope and the promise of eternal life, the signs which, by showing us nothing, in fact show us everything, show us that the worst thing has happened and that in fact it was the best thing, show us that in the absence of God is the hope of infinite joy. Christ is risen, love lives, and death is never the final word. What's the worst that could happen? Christ is risen.