

Easter Day

St Mary and St Peter, Tidenham, 2019

Edited and expanded for St Briavels and Hewelsfield, 2022

Alleluia! Christ is risen

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

When I was working at Salisbury Cathedral I was good chums with the Head Verger, Anthony, and one year he and I both gave up alcohol for Lent. Many of you I am sure may have also taken on this discipline, or given up something else, perhaps chocolate, smoking, television or, even something less concrete but equally damaging, such as grumbling.

Now Anthony and I had an ongoing disagreement throughout Lent as to precisely how this discipline of giving things up works. I follow the traditional Catholic practice which suggests that as all Sundays are Feasts of the Resurrection, even those of Lent, you can't fast on a Sunday. He claims that there's no point in giving things up if you fall back into your old ways every seventh day, so each year he did the whole whack, even though that adds up to forty-six days, and not forty, if you include the Sundays. I think that there are forty days and forty nights of Lent, not forty-six. He thinks I am a lightweight. I think he is innumerate.

But there are many miles between St Briavels/Hewelsfield and Salisbury, so Anthony will never know that I have just emerged from another lightweight Lent. Still, however we have got here, we have all navigated another Lent, and Holy Week, and here we are on Easter Day. The great day of resurrection. The candle has been lit, the tomb stone is rolled away, and a few days ago our worship was solemn and austere, all is transformed before our eyes into a place of new life, and hope, and joy. And I want to thank everyone who has been involved in preparing this church for Easter – It looks beautiful.

The fasting is over, so let the Feasting begin. And very many wiser and holier people than me have preached in this church on this glorious day before me, and there is one line of thought which says that actually on Easter day there is very little that any preacher can say except 'alleluia!' And there's a reason why we keep saying that word today, and all the way through Easter. Perhaps that is all that needs to be said today. But indulge me just for a few more moments:

Don't stop feasting! We're jolly good, in the Church of England, at the misery. We do that really well. We are less good at the joy. And perhaps that's a reflection of our famous western reserve, or it's got to do with something else. But whether or not you calculate Lent at forty days, like me, or forty-six days, like Anthony, the really important thing to remember is that Eastertide is longer! We feast, for longer than we fast. That's the point. That's the theological heart of the whole thing. We don't get to the end of our long Lenten journey, have a blaze of glory, and then go back to normal. There is no more normal!

We keep Easter for longer than Lent. All the way to Pentecost. To Whitsunday. Easter is not just a day, Nor forty, not forty-six, fifty. Longer than Lent. And really we ought never to stop feasting, because on Easter day we recognise, year by year, that on the day of resurrection everything changes, 'normal' is entirely redefined, because the old has passed away, and everything has changed. At the cathedral on Good Friday I used a prayer which reminded us that what thrown down has been rebuilt, and what had become old is made new, and all things are returning to perfection. Perhaps there we find the message for a world which seems very often too full of pain, misery and trial: of renewed Russian assaults in Ukraine. Of girls denied their education in Afghanistan. Of people being pushed below the poverty line in our own country at a higher rate than generations. Full, also, of the smaller-scale but no less significant personal tragedies of our own lives. Is it right for the preacher to encourage us to party on an Easter Day when all of this is true?

Let us be clear – on Easter Day everything becomes shot through with glory. On Easter Day frightened men and women come face to face with their Lord. On Easter day cloths wrapped tightly around a dead body are laid aside, and a great cold stone sealed by professional soldiers submits not to the strength of arms, but to the power of love. On Easter Day a dead man walks again, and heaven pours into the earth, and the confused and sinful and weak find a new citizenship as the family of God, and the people of the resurrection.

What happens on Easter Day is change at the level of creation. Christ descends into the depths on Good Friday, and that means that depths surrender their power. This is why actually no attempt to conquer by power is ever going to be ultimately victorious. Bullies, conquerors, dictators, these people can wield extraordinary amounts of really dangerous power in the short-term. But the process is flawed ultimately because it depends on imposing fear and pain on other people. That sort of victory is ultimately going to fail because you only win by punishing and beating down and potentially even destroying the people who you object to. You cannot make people love you by violence and fear.

The ancient Orthodox churches of the East have these beautiful hymns that they sing during the time between Good Friday and Easter day, and they sing about Jesus sending into hell, going right into the darkest places of our own experience, the places where we feel alone and afraid, bullied or forgotten, he goes there with us, goes there before us, and because he is there is places are no longer dark. They are light. They are no longer empty: They are filled with love.

Now I'm not saying that this is an immediate balm for the people of Ukraine. Or the schoolgirls of Afghanistan. Or the multitudes in our own country wondering how on earth to decide between heat and food. But I am saying that the balance decisively shifts on Easter day. Death, darkness, fear, hatred,

these things now know that their days are numbered. The tomb is empty. Hell is evacuated of its power. And we who have seen something of this truth are called to join in that victory song, here in church yes, but also the rest of our lives, through the choices that we make, with the relationships that we build, through the care that we have all our brother sister near or far. Easter glory calls us to look at the darkness, even in its death throes, and to remind it that its days are numbered.

Don't stop feasting. Keep going, for now is the victory, now the risen Lord walks with you, reaches out his hand to you to lift you up, and we are an Easter people, and "Alleluia" is our song.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**