

Low Sunday Evensong
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Daniel 6:1-23

Mark 15:46 – 16:8

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

It is one of the most romantic things about being a Christian in Salisbury that we can appeal to the memory of George Herbert, strolling across the water meadows to Evensong in the cathedral from his small parish in Bremerton, taking a break from his pastoral work and his poetry to come before God in his daily prayers.

His prayer poem, ‘Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life’, to the rather less well-known setting by my fellow Gloucestershire boy Alexander Brent Smith, is a masterclass in giving us titles by which we might know something of who our risen Lord is. In just three stanzas we are given nine descriptions of who God is, or the types of relationship that we might have with God. We learn that God is our way, our truth, our life. Those first three, of course, straight out of John chapter 14, regularly read at funerals as well as during this Easter season.

George Herbert goes on to describe God as his Light, his Feast, his Strength, his Joy, Love, and Heart. Every one of those titles, or descriptions, is of course a way of trying to describe the indescribable which is very heart of the truth of Easter: that we are invited into a personal relationship with the God whose strength and power are able even to defeat the devil, empty hell of its authority, and, in the words of Herbert in that poem, be “such a life as killeth death.”

And we are invited into that relationship. That relationship which sounds incredible, which makes of that awesome binder

of the devil and trampler down of the brass gates of hell, a friend with whom we may feast as a welcome guest, and know as close to us as our very heart.

Our second reading, of course, presents the sheer terror of the first witnesses of the empty tomb. It’s worth remembering that the earliest gospel, Mark, finishes not with a resurrection appearance, but with the empty tomb, in the face of which terror and amazement seize the disciples, and “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The resurrection is not a cosy thing. This is not Easter eggs and chicks and daffodils. This is death-defying, Satan trampling, power. And mystery. This is doom-painting stuff.

How does that square with the intimate language of George Herbert? Well, through a daily relationship in prayer. And that, of course, is what Daniel got into trouble for. Think back to our first reading. What brings Daniel under the scrutiny of the presidents and the satraps of King Darius? The fact Daniel is getting down on his knees three times a day and saying his prayers.

Regular prayer makes of our death-defying, Satan trampling Lord of life, an intimate friend, a way, and truth, and life. There is no workaround. There is no shortcut. We need to be like Daniel. To get down on our knees, to say our prayers, to put ourselves in a place where God can speak to us, and we can speak to God, and a relationship develops, and deepens, and begins to feel like the sort of thing George Herbert is talking about. And Eastertide is a good time to revisit that pattern. Think about how you pray, where you pray, how often you pray. Come and talk about it if you want to. Make time for it. Nurture it. It will change your life. It really will.

You are unlikely to be thrown to the lions if you don’t, but if you do, you might just find yourself at the door of the empty tomb.