

## Transforming death to new life

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Easter Sunday, 27 March 2016 during the 10.00 am service at St Peter's Wolvercote.

I don't know about you, but I have to confess I'm glad that Lent is over. I stuck fairly well to some of the disciplines I set myself, but in spite of the fact that it's not actually what Lent is about, I spent a lot of time feeling guilty about the times I failed. And I know that Holy Week is a hugely rich, rewarding, and meaningful week, but it's quite hard work. As it's meant to be, it can be harrowing and painful at times as we try to enter in to Christ's journey to the cross.

But, here we are on Easter morning. RISE HEART, THY LORD IS RISEN!!

Many of you will recognise those opening words of George Herbert's wonderful Easter poem, and as the weight of Lenten expectation and failure fell away, and the sadness of Holy Week was lifted, that's how it felt this morning! RISE HEART, THY LORD HAS RISEN!

It's clear that rising and falling are inseparable. We don't rise if we haven't fallen - and 'falling into the depths' is not confined to Lent and Holy Week!! Times of difficulty are part and parcel of life. We all go through times of sadness, despair, depression and guilt. I've said we don't rise unless we are down, but when we *are* down, it's not always easy to believe that we shall rise out of the depth we are in. But Jesus suffered physical and mental pain and agony. He took upon himself our sins. He went through death and, we're told, through 'hell' and finally rose again. Because God wanted to show us that there is *nothing* that we can experience in our lives that he, through Jesus Christ, cannot transform, bring us through to new life.

It is the very real experience of many people - not just glib words that sound nice in a sermon - that times of suffering *can* bring about growth and maturity. They can bring us to a greater understanding of other people, of what life is about, or to a greater understanding of who and what we are. They can bring incredible embodiments of love and support, or perhaps deepening of relationship and, if we have a faith in God, a deepening of that faith.

Today people of many nations are determined that they can rise even from the horror of terrorist bombings. In this week's leading article in the Tablet, the Editor writes, "*human societies are extremely resilient*" and mentions many examples of the human spirit ultimately rising over chaos. Surely this is the work of God, through the Holy Spirit.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that illness, depression, fear or guilt are things to be sought after, that there is any sense in which God sends them to us from some ulterior motive. They are built in to our human existence, and although it may not seem so at the time, healing is possible and with it, new life.

Healing can come through different means. It may be through the skills of doctors, counsellors, or the love and support of friends. It may come through prayer - our own or the prayers of others - and the healing may not be a cure or a change in our situation, but rather an acceptance of it, with the ability to move on.

However, healing cannot take place if we don't acknowledge and accept that we *need* healing. We often put off going to the doctor or counsellor because we don't want to accept there is anything wrong so the healing

can't start. It can sometimes be very difficult to face up to some of the things we have done wrong. We feel ashamed, simply don't want to 'go there', and keep turning away. But the more we try to push it aside the more it takes over our life, the deeper our depression and the greater the barrier it puts between us and God, perhaps between us and the people we love.

I've been reading a book by Malcolm Guite. In it he briefly looked at Dante's journey, pointing out that in order to reach Paradise, Dante *had* to go through Hell and Purgatory. There was no other road. Christ had to go through death and hell in order to come to resurrection. So it is for us. We shall not come to *true* resurrection, new life, unless we face the dark places of our lives. Guite says, "*There is no place so dark, no situation so seemingly hopeless that cannot be opened to the light of Christ for rescue and redemption*".

Jesus will always be with us as we face those dark places. George Herbert's poem continues:  
*"Sing His praise without delays, who takes thee by the hand that thou likewise mayst rise!"*

Jesus takes *us* by the hand, accompanies us through the same places that he has travelled, perhaps through the support and guidance of other people or through prayer, as we open our hearts to God for him to transform us.

On this Easter Day, we rejoice at Christ's resurrection. We rejoice that he can bring us through the deepest suffering, pain and death, and that he will be with us in and through the things we do wrong, however terrible we think they are. He will transform them, and so transform us.

*Rise heart, thy lord is risen,  
Sing his praise without delays  
Who takes thee by the hand  
That thou likewise mayst rise!!*

We have no intercessions as such today, so in a few minutes of silence I wonder if we might bring to mind any difficulties we have, of pain or of guilt, and open them up to God for his light, so that he truly rises in our hearts today. Bring to mind the many people who are suffering today, for so many different reasons, that they might find comfort and healing, and that somehow human beings may choose to work *with* God rather than against him, to bring relief to those in despair, and to bring new life out of suffering - even death.

Alleluia, Christ is risen  
HE IS RISEN INDEED.