

DIOCESE IN EUROPE

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Bishop in Europe:
The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

BISHOP'S EASTER MESSAGE 2017

“Purity of heart is to will one thing”, said the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. I write these words near the beginning of Lent, a season in which we try even more seriously than usual to order our desires under the overarching desire for God. Since our desires are continually stimulated, manipulated and exploited by powerful forces in the world, Lenten disciplines of even moderate asceticism are strongly counter-cultural and have seldom been more valuable in promoting true spiritual life.

It has been a particular delight for me that the daily lectionary this Lent has us reading through the prophet Jeremiah. Few other biblical characters exemplify such a single-minded longing after God and his purposes. For 40 years, Jeremiah faced the political situation of his day with utter realism. He helped his people navigate their way through one of the most disturbing times in their history – the huge discontinuity and disruption marked by exile in Babylon. Against the false prophets, who disseminated an easy message of ‘business as usual’, Jeremiah is unflinching in proclaiming that God is faithful, but that a very different kind of hope and a so far unimagined future lie on the other side of a painful judgement. “I know the plans I have for you”, declares the Lord, “to give you a future and a hope. You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:11).

Jeremiah provides a suggestive backdrop to Easter. In his book “Outside Eden – Finding Hope in an Imperfect World”, Peter Fisher counters the idea that Easter is an exercise in mere wish fulfilment. We have plenty of evidence to suggest that the disciples who followed Jesus were expecting that, having given up homes, fishing businesses and so on, they would be rewarded with a relatively smooth path to greatness in the kingdom of God. They had, we know, been in the habit of discussing the various positions of honour they could expect. But Jesus’s death seemed to be the unexpected end of their hopes. And Jesus’s resurrection - a new spiritual body - was quite outside the rational categories that had so far been available to them. So the shape of the hope that opens up before the disciples on Easter Day is quite different from anything they had previously known. And, not surprisingly, the new resurrection order dramatically changes the character and capacities of the disciples too.

For most of us, Easter Sunday morning is epitomised by the reading of St. John’s account of Mary Magdalene meeting her risen Lord in the garden. I have been struck, in re-reading this text, by the repeated ‘turning’ of Mary. She is the first to see the empty tomb. After running away in fright, she returns with Peter and the other unnamed disciple. Having seen the empty tomb, the others depart, but Mary remains, standing weeping outside the tomb. When the gardener engages her in conversation she ‘turns around’ and sees Jesus, though without recognising him. It is in the face to face conversation between them, and in particular when Jesus speaks her name, ‘Mary’, that she recognises the risen Lord.

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Rowan Williams comments (in 'Resurrection – Interpreting the Easter Gospel'): "She, the one who had turned, again and again, in ever-dwindling hope, now finds that hope answered. Turning, over and again, to the name, the figure, the recollection of Jesus, even when it can only seem abstract and remote, issues at last in knowing with utter clarity that it is still he who calls us into our unique identity." It is in turning, *metanoia* or conversion (or re-conversion) that we find Jesus and are found by him. Thus Mary finds a new future and a new hope.

Easter 2017 greets an uncertain and fearful European continent. The achievements of the post-war decades are being radically questioned. The story of smooth progress towards an ever-more prosperous, liberal and globalised future is being angrily protested against. Yet we don't know what could replace it. The European Commission has published a White Paper that offers five very different scenarios, and both Protestant and Catholic Churches are holding conferences on 'The Future of Europe'. There is, as yet, little in the way of genuinely convincing and inspiring ways forward. We feel ourselves to be in a kind of 'Holy Saturday', with old hopes having gone and a new vision yet to crystallise.

If that is our situation, we can take courage from Jeremiah, who assures his readers of a future and a hope that lie, not in the immediate present, but on the other side of exile. For Christians, faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not yet seen (Hebrews 11:1). And so, in the purposes of God, Easter bursts upon us in unexpected ways with the promise of a future that we cannot yet specify.

Whatever the vagaries of human history, the seasons of the natural world are a tangible reminder of the faithfulness of God. Each year, the flowers grow and the trees blossom. As I write this, my daffodils are just starting to show the first yellow of Spring. I am reminded that amidst the sad Lamentations of Jeremiah (which are traditionally read on Good Friday), the prophet can nonetheless declare: "The Lord's compassions never fail, they are new every morning: Great is your faithfulness!"

In closing, I want to thank all our clergy and lay people who will be involved in the preparation and conduct of worship for Holy Week and Easter. I wish insight and skill especially to those who will be endeavouring to communicate the Easter message in ways that will connect with regular churchgoers and visitors alike. I hope and pray that people will turn to meet the risen Lord in the welcome and worship we offer.

I wish you all a blessed and joyful Easter.

+ Robert Gibraltar in Europe

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