

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Easter Sunday

17th April 2022

If one thing is certain in this life –

this isn't me, this is how a Cambridge professor begins a theology book –

If one thing is certain in this life, it is that none of us begins at the beginning. We find ourselves somewhere, discover something of what went before, of how things went in order to bring about the way they are. Growing up is largely a matter of learning to take bearings. A more fruitful question than 'Where should we begin?' would almost always be 'Where, then, do we stand?'

Where do we stand? Metaphorically. You're sitting down. Where are we? What brought us here, what are the threads that connect us here with other people and other places through time and space, backward and forward, to the beginning, to the end?

We need a map.

*We find ourselves somewhere, discover something of what went before...
[we learn] to take bearings.*

A map.

Where do we stand? Where are we? We stand, the Gospel has told us, in a garden in the half-light of early morning. Someone has died. The tomb has been disturbed. Peter and the other disciple hear this from Mary Magdalene. She ran to tell them – they come running – they run to see what's happened – they go home. But we're still there with Mary, still in the garden. The running has stopped.

The map begins there. None of us begins at the beginning, but this is where we begin. Something has happened.

Something had already happened. Jesus had died. **He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.** So who was Jesus? And now the few simple lines that there are on the map so far blossom into tens and hundreds of lines, to stories and sayings and healings and happenings, all the things people remembered about Jesus, all the stories they told and went on telling. People knew Jesus. Then he was arrested and on trial, and the knowledge crystallised into judgements. He was a troublemaker. He was a disappointment. He was a loved friend who was lost.

And now this moment, with Mary in the garden, is shattering those judgements. None of them can account for this. There is somebody else there. There are people in white – and then she turns round and he's there. She doesn't recognise him at first.

And now all the things that were on the map already, all the things we thought we knew about Jesus, re-align and fall into a new shape. Some of the stories, some of the

happenings seem to stand out more. Stories of transformation. Of new life. Of creation and re-creation. Who is Jesus, if this can have happened, if death is defeated? Who then is this?

He's **human**. This is Jesus, our friend, we knew him, he knows us – 'Mary!' he's saying to her – and he did that appallingly human thing, he died. Human has to be on the map. But – he died, and now here he is saying 'Mary!' And so the word human is pulled into another alignment on the map: something else is at work. This has God's fingerprints all over it. Perhaps 'holy spirit' would be a better way to put that. God has breathed into this, somehow. **Was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human.**

And where 'human' goes, we go. **For us and for our salvation** – this is about us, whatever this is – **he came down from heaven, was incarnate...** and the Christmas stories fall into place on the map. This was a human child who was news, news from heaven, news in heaven. The good news.

Back and back it goes. If Jesus is this, if Jesus is somehow the point on the map where we meet God – we're going to need a bigger map. The map expands, we must sellotape on another bit of paper to make room for all the stories we already knew about God, stories of rescue and promise and persistence and forgiveness, stories of making and shaping. That other story that happens in a garden, where what grows on the trees is life and the knowledge of good and evil. The whole story, the story of how there is anything rather than nothing, the story of creation in the beginning. **Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.** After all, we are back at the beginning.

The Cambridge professor who said that none of us begins at the beginning was called Nicholas Lash. He also said this: this faith, this story, everything we've been mapping – it's not an ideology or a system of ideas. It's not that there's a checklist of interesting concepts we are more or less signed up to. In a system of ideas there would be no room for Pontius Pilate. Christianity, said Nicholas Lash, 'is not a world-system of beliefs. It is a people with a memory and, for all the world, a hope.'¹ A people with a memory: the map stretches back to the beginning. A people with a hope: it goes on. We're not at the edge of the map yet.

We are part of this story: this is our memory and this is our hope. If there's room for Pontius Pilate there can certainly be room for us. We are already there in the garden with Mary Magdalene. We are there in the confusion, the grief, the weariness, the disciples running about not knowing what to make of it, the muddle about the gardener. We are there, included in it all, when Jesus says 'my Father and your Father, my God and your God'. We are there with the disciples hearing Mary's news. We are there with Mary, sent to tell them who she has met. This is a story that has shaped us. The lines on the map connect to us. It's the family history of the people of God.

So *we* are on the map. **One church, catholic** – for everybody – **apostolic** – sent like Mary to tell people who it is we have met. Washed and made new in **one baptism for the forgiveness of sins**. Our memory is on the map and our hope: **the holy spirit, the giver of life, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come**. The map is only a map, an outline, a plot summary. But we are living the story it outlines. The story is God's: God is

¹ Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*

telling us, making it, being it. In Jesus we are caught up in the life of God, included in the story.

We are a bunch of bruised and bewildered people in a garden in the half-light. We are a people with a memory and, for all the world, a hope. This meeting with the risen Christ is our beginning. Again and again, we begin here. Again and again, we bump into someone – someone in need, someone we're not sure about, someone who might be the gardener, someone tiresome, someone awkward, someone good, someone astonishing – and in them, by the grace of God, we meet Christ. And the lines connect on the map, and the map is the map of the **kingdom**. Which **will have no end**.

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