



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen delivered the sermon during the Festal Eucharist at York Minster today. This follows in full:

'For whom are you looking?' (John 21. 15)

This is Christ's question to Mary Magdalene on the morning of the first Easter day - and at that point still unknown to her.

The answer, of course, is that she's looking for Jesus, the very person who is addressing her; and although I don't know exactly why each one of you has come to York Minster this morning, I expect we all have this in common: we're looking for Jesus.

Perhaps you are someone of robust faith and you are here, as it were, to further deepen the relationship with God that you already have.

Or perhaps you are searching, confused and concerned by the trials and horrors of our world and believing there must be a better way?

Perhaps you've glimpsed this way in Jesus and even, maybe, in some of those who follow him, and you're here to see if he really can be found today?

Or perhaps you really don't know why you are here at all.

You walked in off the street. It's a good way of getting to see York Minster without having to pay the entrance fee.

Or you like the music.

You love the building.

Or maybe, for you, this place, at this hour, is the last chance saloon, that, like one of the thieves crucified with Jesus, and knowing the ways your life has not turned out as you had hoped, you are crying out: 'Jesus remember me.'

Mary herself had come to the garden to anoint a corpse. It was still dark. She probably couldn't sleep. All her hopes were dashed. Nailed to the tree and now buried in a tomb.

And here is the first enigmatic message of Easter. The tomb is empty. 'He is not here', are the first words spoken to describe - and even begin to explain - what has happened.

You are looking for him. But he is not where you put him. Not where you left him. Not where you are expecting him to be.

And then, lingering in the garden – while, I note, all the men in the story rush around like headless chickens, looking busy, but achieving very little

- Mary sees someone whom she believes to be the gardener.

Perhaps he knows what has happened? Perhaps he has seen the body taken away?

He speaks to her; 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?'

And all I'm suggesting to you this morning - whoever you are and for whatever reason you find yourself here - is that in and through and beyond, and at the same time right in front of you in this place, in this service, in these words you are hearing now, and in the profound comfort of the sacramental presence of the risen Jesus in broken bread and poured out wine, sisters and brothers, it is this same Jesus who stands before you.

You came to look for him, but the profound, beautiful, life changing truth of the gospel is that he is looking for you. He has plumbed the depths of what it is to be human, even sharing death itself.

And now he has returned.

He is not on the cross where we executed him.

He is not in the tomb where we buried him.

He is with us - by his Spirit and in and through the work and witness of his Church.

And, I want to say this to each of you. He loves you very much. He cares for you.

He has known you since the very first moment of your being.

He delights in you.

He weeps over your feelings; cries out at the injustices and cruelties you have experienced.

He longs to be so invited into your life, that he may be alive in you for others, so that his kingdom, which is not a territory on a map with borders and governments, but a beautiful, ever expanding network of healed heart and changed lives, that through this, He can change the world itself, even if it is just one heart at a time.

And when this happens: when, like Mary, we hear Jesus speaking our name; when we discover that he has always been looking for us, we receive him with joy, embrace him and live our lives in him.

And, yes, there is great joy; and there is freedom from fear, from failure, from exclusion and from anxiety; but, no, it doesn't necessarily make life easier. In fact, perhaps harder.

‘Don't cling to me’, says Jesus to Mary. ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ and I am preparing a place for you and for everyone.

Now you will be my representatives in the world, you will be my hands and eyes and feet and heart.

I will be present in the world through you. And your life must be shaped by my life. And yes, this is hard.

During the Second World War, Bishop Wilson of Singapore, and later Bishop of Birmingham, was interned by the Japanese and tortured in the Camp at Changi.

Speaking about his experience in 1946 and what it taught him about following Jesus, he recalled words of one of my predecessors, Archbishop William Temple.

Temple had written that if we pray for a particular virtue, whether it be patience or courage or love, one of the ways that God answers this is by giving us opportunity to express it.

This is not, perhaps, the answer to prayer we would choose, and Bishop Wilson said this in his sermon –

‘After my first beating I was almost afraid to pray for courage lest I should have another opportunity of exercising it; but my unspoken prayer was there, and without God's help I doubt whether I should have come through.

‘Long hours of ignoble pain were a severe test. In the middle of that torture, they asked me if I still believed in God. When by God’s help I said, “I do”, they asked me why God did not save me; and by the help of his Holy Spirit I said, “God does save me. He does not save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but he saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it.” And when they asked me why I did not curse them, I told them it was because I was a follower of Jesus Christ, who taught us that we were all sisters and brothers.

‘I did not like to use the words, “Father forgive them.” It seemed too blasphemous to use our Lord’s words, but I felt them, and I said “Father I know these men are doing their duty. Help them to see that I am innocent.” And when I muttered “Forgive them,” I wondered how far I was being dramatic, and if I really meant it, because I looked at their faces as they stood round and took it in turn to flog, and their faces were hard and cruel, and some of them were evidently enjoying their cruelty.

‘But by the grace of God, I saw those men not as they were, but as they had been. Once they were little children playing with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parent’s love... and it is hard to hate little children. But even that was not enough. Then came into my mind as I lay on the table the words of that communion hymn:

‘Look, Father, look on his anointed face,

And only look on us as found in him.’

‘And so, I saw them, not as they were, not as they had been, but as they were capable of becoming, redeemed by the power of Christ; and I knew that it was only common sense to say “Forgive.”

Few of us will, thank God, find ourselves tested in this way.

But this is the way of Christ. To see ourselves, and to see others, as God sees them and as God loves them. And to be found in Christ. And to forgive, as he forgives.

Dear friends, it is also, the only hope for our world.

And the alternative is on show each day in the terribly inequalities and depravities of our world, which means that even in a country like ours, the sixth wealthiest in the world, child poverty and inequality continues to rise; asylum seekers fleeing terror and torture themselves are treated with indignity; where Christians in Gaza and the West Bank are not able to worship today as we are, where war fomenters, where antisemitism and Islamophobia are on the rise, where conflict smoulders – in the Holy Land itself, in Ukraine, Yemen and Sudan, in human hearts bent on endless retribution, unfound by grace, endlessly banging the table for what we have decided is just, but with no mercy whatsoever.

This is the world where Christ is not recognised; where he reaches out to our sorrows and pleads with us to think again, but we do not listen, so conditioned by vengeful hatefulness and all that has proceeded from it, that we do not hear him calling our name, we do not see him standing among us.

We are here this morning, even with the concerns and conflicts of the world, because we are looking for him and because we know that we need something that is outside ourselves and that can make us, and those we love and all the world what it is meant to be. We long to be found.

After eight months, and the most unimaginably awful torture, Bishop Wilson was released. He wrote very movingly about the joy of seeing sunlight again. He said it was like a foretaste of resurrection and that of course God is to be found on the cross, sharing in the sufferings of the world, but it is the resurrection that has the final word.

Which is why Easter day, this Easter day, is a day of celebration.

The dead wood of the cross has become the tree of life. Where life was lost, their life has been restored.

New Hope and new joy break forth. Flowers grow.

And we, the people of God rejoice.

And forgive me, I think I find myself saying this on every Easter morning, but make no apology for saying it again, for there is nothing the devil and the dark forces of the world hate more than laughter and rejoicing, especially the laughter and rejoicing that comes from victory over evil and even death itself.

This is why we open the Champagne today, fill the fridge with beer, eat lots of chocolate, shuck many oysters, slap legs of lamb on the grill, rustle up the rum punch and dance the night away, embracing one another with hopeful joy and confident expectation: the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! He has appeared to Mary. He longs to come to us. And everything is changed.

One last amazing thing.

After the end of the Second World War and when Singapore was liberated, some of the men who had tortured Bishop Wilson came back to find him. They asked him to baptise them.



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