**Bishop of Leicester’s Easter Sunday Sermon 2023**

This morning is all about hope, and the reminder that we all need hope whatever our circumstances. And hope is about more than glib optimism, the vague wish that things will get better, but rather it’s about an inner belief which changes our whole perception of our circumstances, and of life in this world and so changes our behaviour.

Now this is not a trivial question. Over the last six weeks, I’ve been walking around the diocese, making a pilgrimage to more than 90 of our churches. It’s been a great joy, meeting all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds. Yet I’ve also encountered people in all sorts of need.

Near the beginning of the walk, I visited a hotel which is housing asylum seekers. About 100 families in a beautiful old country house hotel. The popular perception is that the government is spending far too much money housing people in these sorts of establishments and giving them every luxury imaginable. The reality is that the hotel is several miles from the nearest town and there is no transport into the town. So if they want to do anything other than spend all their time in the hotel they have to walk for an hour along a busy main road with no pavement or street lights. And within the hotel there are no activities. When I sat and talked with a family from Iran, they said that their greatest wish was to have English classes so that when they left the hotel they would be able to get a job and contribute to society in England. The father looked at me with desperation in his eyes – “what are we to do” he said in faltering English, “if we stay here we will go…” he tapped on his head, obviously not knowing how to describe the mental health problems he feared.

On another leg of my walk, I met a farmer in North-West Leicestershire. His family have farmed this piece of land since the time of the Doomsday book – that’s about 1000 years ago. I was deeply moved to hear him speak of his connection to the land. And no doubt, for most of those 1000 years, very little had changed about the land – farming techniques have changed, and the types of crop or animals farmed – but the land has been mostly unchanged. Then, during his lifetime, the government took part of his land for building the M1 motorway, then the A42 dual carriageway, then some of the land was taken for East Midlands airport, and now he faces the prospect of losing some more of his land to the HS2 trainline. He was given no choice about any of these things. And basically, he said, if he didn’t feel such a connection with his family’s land, he would have sold up and moved a long time ago. “What next” he said, “it’s as if no one wants farmers anymore.”

Finally, one of the recurrent themes on many of our walks was the increased cost of living and the financial hardship being experienced by many households. Often this is hidden from plain sight, and only apparent in the stories told by people accessing foodbanks, or warm spaces. But these are real stories of hunger and poverty in 21st Century Britain, one of the world’s richest economies. And I think it is fair to say that many people do not see a way out of their situation.

Now, why I am telling you these stories on Easter Sunday when we are thinking about Jesus rising from the dead? The link of course is hope, for there are many people in our society and around the world living without hope, believing that nothing can change, and no one cares.

It could be argued of course that all these situations could be addressed through changes in government policy and spending - local and national, together with additional support from charities and voluntary sector. And as some of you may know, I’ve drawn on some of these examples in my recent speeches in the House of Lords, arguing for change. But still it is true to say, that even where change is happening it is often very slow. And at times the situations seem to get worse before there is any sign of things getting better.

So perhaps there’s a deeper change needed. One which no amount of government spending can address and no amount of voluntary support. Perhaps it’s to do with changes in attitudes and behaviour of ordinary citizens like you and me. And perhaps, that change can only come about when we ourselves are filled with hope – the firm belief that our actions not only make a difference in this life but contain the seed of change for all eternity.

This brings us back to hope, Easter hope. George Herbert, the famous priest and writer of the 17th Century wrote a poem about Easter. Let me read it to you, before reflecting further on Easter hope.

RIse heart; thy Lord is risen.  Sing his praise
                         Without delayes,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
                         With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined[1](https://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Easter.html#1) thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
                         With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
                         Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
                         Pleasant and long:
Or, since all musick is but three parts[2](https://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Easter.html#2) vied
                         And multiplied,
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

Being from the 17th Century, the poem contains some words which may not be familiar for us today. But let me take two images from it. The first, the beautiful image of the risen Lord Jesus Christ taken our hand, so that we, like him, may rise. Herbert often pictured God as a friend, a close friend who is always several steps ahead of us on the road and therefore can offer us a hand as we follow where he leads.

This Is supreme act of love. God knows that we lack the courage and strength to make the changes that we know are needed and so, like the best of friends, he takes us by the hand and helps us to follow in this way. Our life can become like gold says Herbert, or even more we can be just – in other words at peace with ourselves and those who bring peace and justice to the world.

And secondly, all this is connected to our praise of God - the use of the lute or guitar which encourages us to sing and play our part with all creation in declaring the praises of God. Yet here again we are reminded that we can't do this on our own. The final line of the poem is: “O let thy blessed spirit bear a part, and make up our defects with this sweet art”. So the same sprit which was at work in Jesus Christ is at work in us to take our imperfect praise and make it a sweet sounding offering to God.

This is our hope. Christ raised from the dead takes our hand that we too might be raised to a life of goodness and justice. Our whole perspective on life, on ourselves and our world is changed, and we motivated towards love of God and love of neighbour.

But this is not an instant event, rather it is a process which lasts a lifetime. Like Peter in our first reading, we must be converted again and again to understand the height and breadth and depth of God’s love for all that God has made. And so we pray for the gift of God’s Holy Spirit that our weak and feeble attempts to praise him, may become the means by which we are transformed day by day.

In a moment we will pray for our world, remembering those who suffer at this time. And as we pray that they may know true Easter hope, so we pray that this same hope may inspire us and transform the way in which we look at the world with all its pain and suffering. May we become the instruments of Gods justice and peace, even as we sing God’s praises.

+ Martyn Leicester