

Easter Sunday 2020

As we celebrate this great feast of the Christian year we do so in an unfamiliar landscape. In the last few weeks our experience of life has changed beyond recognition. The coronavirus pandemic has hit hard and a deep sense of fear and foreboding has descended like a heavy fog.

The virus itself has made huge numbers of people ill and, sadly, many have died. As a consequence, stories of desperation and despair flood the headlines. People can no longer accompany their loved ones as they fight for life; they can no longer experience the profound and intimate, albeit desperately shocking and sad, moment of death and, in many, many cases, people can no longer attend the funeral of someone who has deeply touched and shaped their lives.

In addition to this the 'lockdown', aimed at reducing the spread of the virus, has also caused anguish and desolation. Companies have folded and people have lost their jobs; many feel isolated and alone; people's mental health has deteriorated; Women's Aid has never been busier and food banks are feeding more and more families every day.

In the light of all this hardship, one of the striking things that has happened is that these stories of heartache and anguish have been hit head-on by stories of love, comfort and hope. We have seen on our TV screens, heard on our radios and read in our newspapers hundreds of touching stories about people reaching out with both organised and random acts of kindness.

We are witnessing examples of love in action amidst unimaginable experiences of despair and desolation. The desire to bring relief, albeit in part, to those in need has been astonishing and the creativity with which people have found ways to stay in touch has been heartwarming. I'm guessing I'm not on my own in appreciating, what we might call, these Easter stories.

But sadly, the numerous acts of kindness we hear about, or even take part in, cannot take away the raw grief and fear felt by so many. The harsh reality is that for far too many people, the impact of the coronavirus resonates much more with the events of Holy Week than it does with Easter.

Lent and Holy Week provide a rich opportunity for us to focus our attention on the suffering Jesus endured as he made his way towards the horror of the cross. It is a time of lament - a time of sorrow. In searing pain we hear Jesus cry 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me', words many may well be crying out right now. Words that come from deep within; words that spill out of all they are having to bear.

All too often we have a tendency to jump between polarised positions.

Understandably, when we have entered into the events of Holy Week and Good Friday we want to jump straight to the joy and light of the resurrection. In fact it's a great relief to do so. We reflect this leap in church by moving quickly from the stripped church of Good Friday to the vibrant colourful church on Easter Sunday. We move straight from the cross to the empty, and gloriously transformed, tombs amidst the beautiful Easter garden. But in doing so, we miss out a significant part of the story; a part of the story that I think can help us in these turbulent times.

In the Gospel passage set for today we find Mary Magdalene who had witnessed the unbelievable brutality of the cross; someone she dearly loved had died in horrible circumstances. Traumatized and overwhelmed with grief she walks, probably stumbles, in the darkness until she finds the tomb where Jesus had been buried. When she arrives she finds that he's no longer there. How much more can she take. Shocked and dismayed Mary runs off to find Peter and, who we assume to be, John. They all run back to the tomb as fast as they can, only to find that what Mary had told them was true; Jesus was no longer there. The two left, and Mary alone and perplexed stands and weeps. Her heart bleeds. She speaks to angels when they appear in the tomb but finds no consolation. She frantically searches until she finds who she thinks is the gardener, crying out to him and anyone who will listen 'where is he?' It's only when she hears her name spoken 'Mary' that she realises that in the midst of the huge burden of pain she is carrying, she has found the resurrected Jesus - she has found God.

There was for Mary Magdalene a hard journey, literal and metaphorical, between her physical and emotional experience of witnessing the suffering and the death of Jesus and believing in the hope of his resurrection to new life. This was an important journey in which she was distraught, fearful, confused and frantic. It wasn't easy but, having walked her own road of suffering, she found God.

We all have a hard journey ahead. For some, this journey will be unimaginably difficult. Both the planned and the random acts of tremendous kindness and love shown by so many are signs of light in the darkness; they have the imprint of resurrection hope written all over them. But also important is the need to walk in the garden of despair; to walk on the bumpy road with all that the pandemic throws our way and to be the bearers of hope for others as, and when, they find themselves having to make that journey. This isn't easy when communication with others is challenging, but, in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning, as a people of faith this is something we can do

God has woven resurrection into our lives. It is simply there, preset with us. Whether we are floundering around in fear and confusion; whether we are struggling to find God in the midst of it all; whether we find ourselves weeping in the dark, may we know that Christ has risen - he has risen indeed. Alleluia!

I want to end with this beautiful, hope filled, poem written by John Donohue

No one knew the name of this day;
Born quietly from deepest night,
It hid its face in light,
Demanded nothing for itself,
Opened out to offer each of us
A field of brightness that traveled ahead,
Providing in time, ground to hold our footsteps
And the light of thought to show the way.

The mind of the day draws no attention;
It dwells within the silence with elegance
To create a space for all our words,
Drawing us to listen inward and outward.

We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
Transforming our broken fragments
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.

Somewhere in us a dignity presides
That is more gracious than the smallness
That fuels us with fear and force,
A dignity that trusts the form a day takes.

So at the end of this day, we give thanks
For being betrothed to the unknown
And for the secret work
Through which the mind of the day
And wisdom of the soul become one.

John O'Donohue (1956-2008)