

Easter 3 2019

Chichester Cathedral

Any of you who are familiar with the city of Rome will know that its buildings and many of its streets, seem to exude the ideology of *power...and empire*. Living right in the centre for four years, my wife and I became used to being dwarfed by huge baroque churches and renaissance palaces, as well as the uncompromising modernity of the Mussolini era. It was not difficult to imagine, for example, a Roman emperor appearing before the crowd at the top of the steep steps up to the Capitoline hill or the thousands watching the games in the circus maximus, even though that is now little more than a vast expanse of grass with raised edges.

It is scenes like this that the author of the Book of Revelation is calling to mind in our second reading this morning. As we heard, he first describes the angel asking: "*Who is worthy to open the scroll?*" In the cosmic, allegorical language of Revelation, the scroll is a document that contains God's secret plan for the end time, the fulfilment of his kingdom. And someone sufficiently "*worthy*" must be found to break the seals which will initiate the events described within it: events through which God will be triumphant.

And that person is Jesus. "*Worthy is the lamb who was slain*". The author draws on the lamb imagery in Exodus and Isaiah. Jesus was slain, like a lamb to the slaughter, because his death and resurrection were *necessary* for the unfolding of those future events when God would triumph.

And John uses the idea of the one seated on the throne – coded language for Jesus - being worthy of honour by "*saints from every tribe and language*" and "*thousands and thousands*" praising him, because that is what many citizens of the Roman empire would have been familiar with: - the praise and honour, glory and power frequently directed at the emperors in Rome.

But – and this surely apposite for our own time – John would also have known that a vision which offered such honour to the risen Lord, rather than the emperor, would

inevitably lead the church into conflict with those in power, as it indeed did. And now that a recent study has revealed Christianity to be the most persecuted faith in the world, this is clearly still the case. Awful though persecution is, it can be a sign that the church is really doing its job well in those places.

In the modern era, it is more common for the church to witness to the risen Lord through *service*, rather than through power games and vast shows of glory. There are times and places for the church to be triumphant and confident and indeed cathedrals are places which, rightly, need to do that from time to time.

This is not least because the church - with some justification - can sometimes seem apologetic and maybe even more ready to dampen enthusiasm than to celebrate it.

I was once at a school prize day at which a man (whose name I have forgotten) - who been to the North Pole - gave a speech. He told the children that when he reached the pole, thanks to modern technology, he managed to somehow telephone his mother. "*Mum, I am at the North Pole*" he exclaimed. To which she replied "*Darling, I am at the checkout in Tesco's, can I ring you back?*" Sometimes the church is seen as a bit of spoil sport in that kind of way.

As we heard in our first reading this morning, St Paul encountered the risen Lord in a moment of *great* glory. There were flashing lights from heaven, which deprived *him* of his sight and Jesus' own voice rendered his *retinue* speechless. Some people meet Christ like that, in the moments of glory and power. But many don't. Some may indeed, have that kind of "road to Damascus" experience – dramatic, completely life changing and over in a few moments. But many others have a "road to Emmaus" experience; coming more slowly to an understanding of who Jesus is and entering into a relationship with him over time.

And there is nothing wrong with that. We often find Christ in the very mundane and everyday

And that brings us, neatly, to this morning's Gospel passage. What is fascinating about this reading is that so soon after Jesus has appeared to them and Thomas has

declared him “*my Lord and my God*”, not only have the disciples returned to their ordinary, everyday lives and gone fishing, but then, also, at first, they fail to recognise Jesus sitting on the beach! This has led many commentators to conclude that this passage is an “add-on” to the end of John’s Gospel, an epilogue, if you like.

What is *also* fascinating is the rich seam of symbolism that John uses, which need to concern us too much this morning. But we might wonder why he tells us that there were exactly 153 fish! Was it to express the universality of the coming mission: the only 153 species of fish known at the time representing the extent of the work to come? We could interpret the fact that they had a meal and that Jesus took and distributed bread to remind John’s readers of presence of Christ at the Eucharist, which I don’t doubt. Then Peter becomes central to the story, as it develops because he is to be the chief shepherd. All of that is in there.

But what I am left reflecting on most of all is that “add on” or no “add on” what we have here is Jesus, yet again, *meeting people where they are at*. Attending to their ordinary tasks with – it would appear at first – everything terribly mundane. But out of the mundane and out of everyday life there comes a resurrection appearance. Christian life is often like that if we are alert to it.

So, when you think about it: from Acts, we hear how one who persecuted Christ’s followers, becomes the principle missionary of the early Church. As Jesus says to Ananias in his vision “*he (Saul) is an instrument I have chosen*”. Philip, whom the church celebrated last week, along with James, just “didn’t get it” about Jesus for a long time, but they too were chosen instruments, alongside a rag-bag of fishermen and others. These are not people who were up there with the people of power in the Roman empire.

And not one of us here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Chichester, should think that God hasn’t chosen us as his instrument either... however slow off the mark we might have been, or still are, on our journey of faith.