**Easter Day ‘at the Cathedral’**

**12th April 2020**

‘Unprecedented.’ Are you growing weary of that word?

It’s a costly business living through ‘unprecedented times’ – costly in so many ways, not least because as a world we’re having to build our road as we walk it. No one has been here before us, at least not in these precise circumstances. Although perhaps we ought to acknowledge that were it not for the precedents discerned from earlier epidemics we’d be in a much worse position today than we are.

Yet we are creatures of pattern and precedent, so anything as unexpected as the emergency we’re living through is likely to make us anxious. For, whilst each day may be different we nevertheless rely on each day to be enough like other days to be predictable. And it’s when we’re assailed by threats to the things we take for granted – job, health, social encounter, leisure activity, church – that we begin to feel disorientated, queasy, disturbed.

It’s not just our legal system that looks for precedent, there would be something hugely wasteful if every generation were to reinvent the wheel. And how could we form a meaningful relationship with anyone if their character one day bore no relation to their character the next?

But there’s a downside to this need for pattern and predictability. We can look for patterns when they aren’t there even on a very trivial level. We’ve probably all heard a sports commentator desperately trying to show that past statistics can predict a result. ‘I don’t want to worry supporters of City, but the last time a goalkeeper whose name began with ‘Z’ played in this cup final his side lost 3-0.’

Much more profoundly and instinctively our minds impose patterns in other ways. If we’ve lived through trauma in the past, for example, we may tend to read present experience in the light of that trauma and get things badly wrong as a consequence.

Also, too slavish an attachment to precedent, to what happened in the past may lead us unhelpfully to define and confine the present, making it impossible to change anything because, ‘We’ve always done it this way.’ I wonder whether sometimes we do this to matters of faith too – especially to big festivals like Easter. We probably all have our idea of what really makes Easter special – something to do with big ceremony, grand music and crowds of people. Well, not this year!

But perhaps the absence of trumpet fanfares and loud hallelujahs may help us, in the isolation of our homes, to hear the story afresh – how a few sad disciples went to visit a grave early one morning and found it empty. Perhaps our inability to do Easter ‘the way we’ve always done it’ may help us to rediscover something of the astonishment of those disciples when, weighed down with grief at the death of Jesus, they’re confronted by something utterly new, something (and here’s that word again) unprecedented.

And not only unprecedented but something that turned upside down all their expectations of how life works, how God works drawn from their past experience. Something that cut through the damaging cycle whereby hurt justifies more hurt and the need for retribution requires victims, innocent or not, to pay the price. Something that opens up the tantalizing possibility that if we give God’s way a try, turn away from the darkness of the tomb towards the early morning sun and look for the living amongst the living, we shall discover that we need fear neither life nor death.

As I say this, I’m conscious that our nation as a whole is haunted daily by news of death and dying, the numbers going inexorably upwards, and that perhaps for you the death of a dear one is breaking your heart. But I say it because I believe that Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, allows us to look at life and death differently.

This time of isolation and pandemic shall end. Some of us will emerge deeply wounded by it; all of us shall be changed by it. We must and we shall learn how things might be done differently another time. In this way the unprecedented event becomes itself a precedent, hopefully teaching us good and lasting lessons – including, one trusts, a respect for our Health Service and its staff and for all those others, often lowly paid, on whom we, in reality, depend.

But what about that other unprecedented event that we celebrate this year in this unprecedented way? Might it, for all its inconvenience, set us free to encounter afresh the unrecognized Jesus? Jesus who, as he walks beside us in our sorrow and anguish, enables our hearts to burn with love and our minds to be opened to the God who makes all things new and who calls us, beyond all that enslaves and controls and limits us, to an Easter life in which each day offers a new beginning.

Might it be that when at last we do gather and the bread is broken and the wine shared, our eyes shall be opened to recognise that the risen Christ has not only walked by our side but that his suffering with us, in intensive care unit and grieving home, gives us cause today and every day, to cry, with all those other isolated souls scattered around our nation, ‘Hallelujah! Christ is risen!’

Amen.