

No Way Back: The Promise of Easter in a Post-Covid-19 Society

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On Easter Sunday, the Archbishop of Canterbury was interviewed for the *BBC Andrew Marr Show*. Inevitably then, as now, the pandemic dominated the discussion. I was especially taken by this comment from Archbishop Justin:

“once this epidemic is conquered we cannot be content to go back to what was before as if all was normal...there needs to be a resurrection of our common life, a new normal, something that links to the old but is different and more beautiful.”

Easter is a Season that says that the world as we know it is turned upside down. Death has no more dominion. There is resurrection and new life. The Old Order has gone; behold, a New Order is born. That is what Christians first believed, and they had every reason to: they experienced the confounding of their old common life. Instead of cherishing the memory of a dead charismatic Galilean preacher and healer, they were faced with something wholly other: a resurrection commanding and creating a new social and moral order. This is Christianity: not simply a personal relationship with Jesus, but a commitment to living our communal life utterly differently from what went before.

From the beginning Christianity was a tactile – yes, even a touching – faith. This new religious movement looked after widows and orphans. It gathered to break bread. It was congregational and social. It redistributed wealth, and gave alms.

In the rather amusing depiction of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, we see the iconic rendering of *John 21: 17* in Fra Angelico's fresco adapted for the pandemic. It is ironic that “*noli me tangere*” has been inverted like this, because, of course, the resurrection is the fulfilment of the incarnation. In Christ, there is no longer “social distance” between us and God. God chose to dwell with us in Christ in order that we might be one with another and one with God. Coming to us as a child, and ascending as an adult, after the resurrection, the unity expressed is that our life is now bound up with God's life.

Bringing about the Kingdom of God is therefore what Christian faith is about. It is not supposed to be the *Church Preservation Society* (good work though such bodies undoubtedly do for our heritage and spirituality). Christianity is a faith of touch, and of bonding. If you don't believe me, just look at the sheer numbers of people Jesus touches in the gospels. Jesus is the body language of God. He sees the unseen; hears the unheard; speaks for the mute and marginalised; touches the untouchable. The incarnation closes the gap between humanity and divinity. In Christ, there is no more social distance between God and the world.

So, what are we learning about the way forward? I know that in these times, many of us want to do more for others – to make this pandemic more bearable, with its stark economic consequences. Few, if any, will be able to escape some impact. There are health concerns – for ourselves and those we care for and love. Jobs are at risk, as are savings and pensions. Social and physical distancing is testing.

In a few months, this pandemic has dramatically altered societies. COVID-19 has penetrated every culture, class, region and race; and regardless of religious affiliation, sexuality or gender. It has devastated social relations, dismantling ways of expressing warmth and welcome, cruelly robbing mourners of rituals of bereavement and the ability to seek comfort among friends and family – all in our efforts to stem the spread of the virus.

This unthinkable scale of loss, the dramatic measures implemented to prevent further losses, and the vacuum this has left in most of our 'social lives', in their broadest and most vital sense, has resulted in a collective experience of trauma and grief. There is much private suffering. There is and shall be enormous structural suffering.

In the midst of this, I expect that you, like me, will have been inspired by stories of medical and care staff bravely and selflessly protecting the public and paying with their lives. And of neighbourhood and community schemes working overtime to care for the isolated and our most vulnerable. Of charities that have stepped in to unforeseen gaps of provision and care. Those at the forefront of care and charity will continue to need our support long after the immediate repercussions of this pandemic are past.

We will need strength, courage and imagination in the days that stretch ahead. Our best resources always lie within us, and are amongst those closest to us, our communities and colleagues. We are as a nation beginning to learn valuable lessons. That the primary purpose of government and leadership is to protect lives, not the economy. Care comes before cash; lives before livelihoods. We will only get ahead of the virus if we put people first. We will have to live differently, if we are to beat the virus rather than follow in its wake.

In the meantime, we are on our own Road to Emmaus. Just as two unnamed disciples found (*Luke 24: 13-35*), Jesus' resurrection *re-minds* us. The resurrection changes the way we think and act. As we witness him who was dead, breaking bread before us, we must look forward, not merely backwards.

Now, all over the world, we are being *re-minded*, and in the recovery of memory, *re-membering*. But this is no longer just an act of recollection. Rather, *re-membering* is putting things back together that should not have been taken apart; and putting things together anew – to make a better world.

So, communities have mobilised, and acted where the state cannot function well, if at all. Aid packages, food parcels, spare and vacant flats for healthcare workers are part of this. People are rediscovering service to their neighbours, communities and those who cannot care for themselves. Community drivers, babysitting networks for children of key workers, new ways of teaching, playing and relaxing are all being born. In one city, a “Mums on the Run” group now jogs to fetch medicines for those isolated at home. Without a hint of irony, they re-christened themselves as the “Drug Runners”.

We have already begun to learn some new ways of living as a result of these challenges. A truly charitable heart and a giving attitude is powerful and unstoppable, when it is wedded to serious spiritual and social intelligence. We may be socially distant from one another at the moment. But we are not apart.

Easter calls us to the core of our commitment. We are *bonded* together in faith, hope and love. We are bonded together to *re-member* this world of Christ’s, as God would piece it back together. To *re-mind* the world that resurrection changes our moral and social order. Knitted together in acts of charity, love, service and sacrifice, we discover touching places between our humanity and God’s divinity; between solitude and society. Standing in the midst of this is the resurrected Christ – the sign of God’s overwhelming abundant love and grace that we are bidden to accept and then offer to all. As Archbishop Justin has said:

“once this epidemic is conquered we cannot be content to go back to what was before as if all was normal...there needs to be a resurrection of our common life, a new normal, something that links to the old but is different and more beautiful...”

Indeed. Christ is Risen.