

[An unusual start to a sermon, perhaps, but if you will permit me, as I prepare to leave this place for the first time since August, I should like to dedicate this sermon specifically to my friends in the House who have meant that I can say with the disciples, *I have been glad to see the Lord*, and who have evidenced that:]

Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith in Jesus Christ [...] that life is in God's son.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O

LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

Amen.

Easter 2021, in its relationship to the state of the world around us, has been the most significant Easter in my life to date. Our commemoration of the resurrection of God's son – the culmination of our journeys *with Christ* through the wilderness and the suffering which he endured upon the cross – comes now with the added context of an ongoing journey to which you and I and those who *believe not the record that God gave of his Son* all clearly have a stake.

Lockdown has hurt. Our time in the wilderness and the suffering which that has entailed is now, please God, coming to an end. We have now embarked upon what our prime minister describes as a 'one-way road to *freedom*'.

Saint Augustine famously said, in words which we use in the Office of Morning Prayer, that in the service of God is 'perfect *freedom*'. Saint John makes that clear enough in our Epistle today. *Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith* in Jesus Christ, through whom this Eastertide we are raised up, and in whom we are called upon to live again. To come fully alive in Christ is what it means to be a Christian. What it means to be fully alive in Christ is simple. The Rev'd Samuel Wells puts it this way, and these are his words now. Gratefully *receive* the abundance God is giving you, *evidence* that transformation from scarcity to abundance to which God is calling you, *dwell* with God in that life, and *share it. Share it far and wide.*

Take the chance to do that today: to come before God and say, 'I will do it'. *'I believe on Jesus who is the Son of God? You will have the witness in yourself. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his son.*

He that hath the Son hath life, and in that life is freedom. Christ came here. Christ dwelt among us. He suffered death upon the cross, and, therefore, we can take comfort in our experiences of the sorrows and perplexities of the world because God has been here before. The world did its worst to Jesus; yet he was raised from death, and in Him we are given the chance that we need to be liberated and say, 'Yes, I will live again?'

'I will live again', even though there is no 'one-way road to *freedom*'. We never simply go one way down the road. Consider the analogy that we have entered in and out of lockdown over the course of the past year. We are constantly being called upon to recognise that in the process of being stripped down and made bare, God is preparing us anew to receive his life. The life which God gives us inheres in the life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Christ's life was a 'one-way road to *freedom*' because he rendered unto God the Father an obedience which led to his death upon the cross. His was a level of obedience with which naturally we struggle, back and forth, until we realise in those consummate moments of grace that our journeys are not quite like that because God the Son has already *died for us, risen for us*, and now offers us in the Holy Ghost an abundance of life that the world cannot ever overcome.

The disciples certainly learnt that lesson according to our Gospel passage. They were most likely in that upper room where the Last Supper had been held. The disciples were afraid and had shut the door, as you and I are wont to do when we are afraid of the world around us. One might even say that the disciples were in lock-down – locked in by sin – and who can blame them. If the world kills our friend, or if there is a world-wide virus, lockdown is what we must do. Our Lord, however, does two things for us in this context. He comes, and he stands in the midst and says, '*Peace be unto you.*' And then, he shows us his hands, his side, as if to say to us, 'I too am hurt. I have missed you, my friends, look what the world has done to us. But do not be afraid because my heart beats – for the Father. Our door is never shut. And *peace be unto you* because I am alive.'

Then were the disciples glad to see the Lord.

There is in this passage, I think, good instruction as to what we are called upon to do in 2021. Know first that our Father has sent us into the world with all its sorrows and perplexities. It is not always easy-going because we can so easily be taken in by wickedness and malice. We fear that the world will overcome us. The world really can hurt. But the way for us to overcome the world is not as simple as waiting for the government to lift restrictions on our lives because our wounds in our hands and our sides go far too deep for a simple gathering of family or friends to overcome. Their company is not actually enough when wickedness and malice are at the door.

Those disciples remind us of this essential truth because, although they were comforted by one another in that room, they could not find within themselves the means to open the door to their hearts, be glad, and say, 'We will live again', even when Jesus came and stood in the midst. He said those words, *peace be unto you*, not once but twice. He said twice, '*peace be unto you*' because he knew that his company was not enough. The Lord knows that it is the wounds in his hands and his side, the wounds which he shares with us, which allow us to overcome the world, which set us free in our belief.

Christ died for us and rose for us and lives for us. It seems to me that now more so than ever, we are called upon to witness to those who do not yet believe the record that God gave of his son, that we can overcome the world together. Its loneliness and suffering and every slash in those wounds which penetrate deep into our souls – Why has the world forsaken us? – can be overcome; have been overcome; will not be overcome by a mere sticking plaster in the form of the lifting of restrictions by the state. The world is overcome again and again by these words: *Peace be unto you*. '*Peace be unto you*', uttered by a God who has been here before, who offers us an abundance of life, and who would like you to affirm with me, that 'Yes, I will do it'. 'I will live again, an unrestricted life, rooted in the life of the Triune God.' Likewise, I shall turn to my neighbour and say, '*Peace be unto you*.'

Then, *we shall be glad to see the Lord*.

We shall *evidence* that *Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith in Jesus Christ*. When we *dwell* with God in the abundance of life which he gives us freely, then, we shall *share far and wide* the truth that *life is in God's son*.