

We have waited

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

In speaking about God, in thinking about God, in singing about God, language is always borrowed. St Bernard of Clairvaux, pictured in one of our stained glass windows, is often attributed as the source of the Lenten hymn, 'O Sacred Head sore wounded.' In it we find the verses, "What language shall I borrow, to praise Thee, heavenly Friend..."

When we try to express the mystery of creation or salvation, the power of the cross or the glory of the resurrection, sometimes all we can do is to reach for images and metaphors, poetry and song and music, because what they offer to us is often something that extends far beyond the reach of ordinary language. Words bring something, make no mistake, but through art and imagination there are further ways in which we can experience the wonders of our faith.

Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, placed within the larger work of *The Messiah*, is one of those pieces of art that weaves musical notes around borrowed words from the New Testament Book of Revelation. *The Messiah*, written at a low-point in Handel's life in 1741, is said to have been written in just 24 days. Handel composed *Messiah* without getting much sleep or even eating much food. When his assistants brought him his meals, they were often left uneaten. His servants would often find him in tears as he composed. When he completed the Hallelujah Chorus, he reportedly told his servant, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels."

Since the mysterious events of the resurrection, over two thousand years ago, people have been borrowing words and images ever since. In fact, the idea of resurrection and the defeat of death,

and the ending of grief we read about in the Gospels are themselves borrowed ideas from the Old Testament. You can see it clearly in the reading from Isaiah:

...God will destroy...the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces...

Jesus' followers have always struggled to describe the indescribable. There are no witness accounts of the moment Jesus rose in His tomb, whether there was dark or light; no account of who folded the graveclothes, or indeed rolled the stone away. Writers have perhaps wisely focussed not on an account of resurrection, but on the effect of resurrection.

The effect of resurrection was to give hope where there had been despair. But also to raise doubts and lay before those first Christians the possibility of believing that something had happened, something had changed, and because of that something, everything was different. Or at least, the way we look at things can be different. I don't know that I've ever fully understood resurrection, the biology or physics or chemistry. I don't know that I need to as that kind of knowledge for this kind of event seems to restrict and limit and control. What I find is that the effect, the change in those first disciples, men and women, and the wildfire spreading through a conservative faith like ancient Judaism throughout the known world, is evidence enough that something happened. People had waited for it, and now they wanted it.

People had been waiting for a long time. In the Isaiah reading the idea of new life and hope and freedom tied in with the decades-long experience of the exile and the utter brokenness of the Jewish way of life. No Temple, no city, no land, no hope. But the promise that God had not forgotten them, and would come again, and they would be healed and freed, and tears wiped away from every eye, and a time of celebration and new beginning.

"Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, that He might save us. His is the Lord; we have waited for Him, let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

"...we have waited...we have waited..."

Waiting on God is a theme that runs throughout the Book of Isaiah, as it does through the life of faith itself. God's promises come to fruition not on our timetable, but on God's. In a world, our world, that expects instant reaction, instant response, because we think we have instant control, this is not an easy word. Why should we have to wait? If God is going to do it anyway, why wait? If God wants to end suffering and injustice and death, why wait? If God wants to stop war, and abuse, and poverty, and famine, why wait? If God wants the evil in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, in Sudan and South Sudan, in Afghanistan and Haiti, and in all the forgotten but still hot-spots on earth, why wait? If God wants to heal, why wait? If God wants to bring a painful life to a peaceful end, where death is as much a gift of God as is life, why wait?

This is not the child-like frustration of waiting for Christmas morning and the time to open presents; or the frustration of waiting for Easter Day and the opening of chocolate eggs. Or the giving up of Lenten sacrifices. There are international and national and personal situations that hurt and scar. If God is a God of life and justice, why wait?

Since humanity began sorting out its ideas of God, there has been an age-old tendency to force God's hand, to set God's timetable, to tell God what to do, and how, and when. We frame the question, "Don't You agree, God...?" We see it in human life. When people are afraid of what the outcome might be concerning something they really want or have already planned and simply want confirmation that you'll go along with them and not be difficult, they'll ask that rhetorical question, "Don't you agree?" effectively shutting down any personal decision-making or differing of opinion.

Any and every process of transformation is more often a process, not a quick fix. Like resurrection. Jesus may have been dead, then alive, but it was the effect of this over centuries, millennia, with the waiting and the turning and the transforming and the changing that is the real Easter affirmation. We work through the pain and suffering with the hopeful realism that all things will change in time. Hopeful and deeply confident that God will do what God has promised: to be with us forever. Not in leaps and bounds, like those of the first Easter morning, but in the positive step-after-step of real life lived in the real world.

I'm not sure I agree with the apostle Paul who talks about resurrection and the following change taking place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. It might, who am I to limit what God might do, or how. But more likely the resurrections that I have seen, the little Easters that occur on a daily basis in real people's lives, are the process of a steadily unfolding dawning of light.

The Easter promise, alongside the waiting and waiting, is meant to sustain us for the longer haul. God's "plans formed of old" secures our future with God, and the road we take towards that future has to take us through faithful living in the present. We will still face sorrow; grief will still tax our joy; and the redemption we yearn for must be made real in the way we live in the interim, between our *'now'* and God's *'then'*.

God's resurrection promise in Jesus is to lead us, step by step, from *'now'* to *'then'*. Walking with us, as God always promises.

This backward and forward trajectory of our faith lives; the disasters and triumphs; the despair and the hope; the dark and the light; the death and the life; the crucifixion and the resurrection. Through this we have waited, but not without hope. Through this we have waited, the Good Friday and Holy Saturday worlds, but Easter is coming. The promise is sure, the light turns the lock of Hell's doors, and the hand upon the key to life is the hand of the risen Jesus.

In the John gospel passage, there's a lot of running around: Mary Magdalen, and Peter, and John. The stillest person in the narrative is Jesus. "...she saw Jesus standing..." Jesus is waiting. Waiting for Mary and Peter and John to slow down, to relax, to notice, to hear, to see, to begin to understand that what they had been waiting for was there. Jesus the Saviour was there.

On this Easter morning, with wonderful words and music, and Easter treats waiting for us next door, let's take these moments to slow down, our racing minds, our busy bodies, for we too have waited. See Jesus standing. See Jesus now. See Jesus here.

The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen