

Always Look on the Bright Side of Life?

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

Easter Sunday

April 16th 2006

Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

Monty Python, like all good satirists, held up a painfully truthful mirror to Christianity when they made *The Life of Brian*, all those years ago. At the end, impaled on numerous crosses scattered across the desert plain, victim after victim joined in with the haunting refrain "Always look on the bright side of life". What was going on? Was this a blasphemous ridiculing of Christianity's central figure at the very point of his most intense suffering, or was it a very cutting, very clever expose of a poverty of ideas within the church?

You don't have to be a musician to know how to distinguish a minor chord from a major chord. Minor chords are about pathos, tragedy and melancholy. They take you to a place of tears, or lead you to a deep place of silence.

Major chords are full of strength, power and happiness.

Minor chords take you to the bottom of the valley, major chords to the top of the mountain. Major chords do the awe, minor chords the wonder.

Christianity is traditionally hot on the minor chord stuff, as you might expect for a religion that is based around a man hanging on a cross. We do pain and suffering rather well. And countless millions of people draw strength from a God who is at home in the valley of tears. Praise God that he is.

But we are not quite so good at dancing. We are great at tracing the rainbow through the rain, but we don't do blue sky and sunshine quite so well.

One of the ironies of the liturgical year is that we place a great emphasis on Lent but, apart from a brief burst on Easter Day, we more or less totally ignore the resurrection. It's almost as if we are happier with a faith that takes us through the valley but we struggle with the enthusiasm, ebullience and confidence of an Easter faith.

We are not completely at home with prime numbers and primary colours.

Voltaire is supposed to have stood up after one particular sermon and said to the preacher. "Preach me your certainties. I have enough doubts of my own".

The Easter message is to do with the certainty of an unexpected resurrection. It is a tale of tears and fears turned to joy.

If Good Friday is about suffering, pain and death, and if Easter Saturday is about bewilderment, bereavement and fear, then Easter Sunday is about transformation, joy, happiness and life.

If you ask what the resurrection of Jesus means, the easy answer is that it proves the truth of Christianity – and that is correct, wonderfully so. Without it the Christian faith is based merely on the power of example.

But there is more to Easter than this. The pattern of Good Friday through to Easter Sunday is like a spiritual template given to all of us, which applies to every experience of life.

How else do you account for the amazing resilience of human beings? It is only as I get older that I begin to see how often you face something in life you feel will crush you, only to look back, some time later, and realise that you have survived it. Indeed, risen above it. It may be horrible and painful at the time but you get through it. It may bruise you, damage you and change you. You may always carry the scars (as indeed Jesus did) but it does not overcome you. Somewhere, somehow, deep within the tomb of your darkest night the divine spark jumps out of the darkness and re-energises you with life and hope.

Not long before I left Birmingham my closest colleague, a hugely talented, exceptionally able and very strong man, had a severe breakdown. I still hold myself responsible for not seeing it coming, but that's another story. For nearly a year Iain was off work, struggling with the smallest things in life, wrestling with acute anxiety and a deep, desperate depression. There were times when I wondered if he would pull through, but slowly – given a lot of prayer and the support of many friends – he started to emerge out the other side. And now, 18 months on, Iain is a changed man through this experience – a far more godly man, his priesthood renewed, closer to God, at home with himself, and more vulnerable to those around him. Iain's Good Friday was horrible, and I still wish I had been able to save him from it. But somehow his Easter Sunday has been a resurrection of such power that you cannot regret the suffering that led up to it.

The thing about Good Fridays is that you can never go round them, only through them. When you experience suffering, life will never return to normal and get back to how it was before. Resurrection always leaves you changed, different and in a new place. It did for Jesus. It did for the disciples. It will for us.

But Christianity is a religion of hope. This is not just the power of positive thinking, Christianity is a belief in the power of the Resurrection to transform the whole of life.

And I have to challenge myself. Can I say this, and look East Africa in the face as it stares down the barrel of drought and famine? Can I look the woman with a sick child in the face, and still say this? Can I look into the eyes of the man who has lost his wife, and still say this, Christianity is a religion of hope? I was going to use the example of Norman Kember to illustrate my point about the resurrection God brings out of our Good Fridays, but then what about Tom Fox, his American colleague shot in the head by the same captors?

But for all that it is hard to do so, I still say yes. This pattern, this template of suffering redeemed, is at the heart of ALL of life. Because of Easter Day, Good Friday is not the last day of the week. Suffering is not the last word. If I ever open a restaurant chain, I'm going to call it Thank God It's Sunday. In God's economy, Sunday comes after Friday.

When I was a young Christian I remember reading a book by a remarkable woman, Jean Darnell, called "From Prison to Praise". It was about the power of praise and thanksgiving to unlock us from all of our negative prisons.

I have found time and again throughout my life that the most powerful thing you can do at your lowest point is to give thanks. It is transformational because it lifts you out and up. It takes you away from Golgotha, to the cool misty morning of the garden tomb and the fleeting glimpse of a familiar presence.

It holds out the promise so gloriously expressed by the mystic Julian of Norwich that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

Always look on the bright side of life? That, of course, is to be fatuous, if not facetious. It does not weep with those who weep.

But because Jesus Christ is risen and risen indeed, we can learn to sing the song of life in a major key.