

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

It was Monday 15th April 2019 – bang on the window from my neighbour – *Have you seen the news – Notre Dame is on fire* – I quickly turned on the screen ... and it’s there alight – it was too hard to believe. It seems incredible that it was just only a year ago that that happened - I expect you can still picture it. Notre Dame and other events like 9/11 are ones where sometimes, you have to actually *see to believe it*, and convince yourself that someone’s not playing a joke on you! As we’ve discovered more than ever in the last month, our digital world has allowed us *to see* far more than was originally simply behind a text, email, phone – I’m now getting used to Teams, Zoom, Whatsapp, Houseparty – and even record myself – gosh if only Thomas was here now – the Disciples would have the evidence that Jesus *had* appeared to them, and to us tuning into this.

Yet despite being able to see so much, many things remain invisible – the enemy of the Coronavirus, parts of the world, much of the ocean, space, heaven, and well God in part of course for his presence and working in part will remain a mystery. But that’s why we need faith and to hear this morning’s Gospel, as we are in a similar situation to the disciples, living in lockdown and wondering what the future may hold and where God may be in all of this. We may ask *How in these times of unknowing and uncertainty, can we walk with others who have or are going through similar experiences* such as the community of Notre Dame, locked out its building, but alive and still strong in hope; how can we learn with those who have are locked out of their homes, their country and in exile – people who feel they may still be stuck in the Holy Saturday moment of time and still waiting with longing for the resurrection of Easter. People living behind more than just locked doors with fear, who long for Jesus to appear and stand among them, to both share his peace and invite them to share with his wounds?

I guess will remember the oddity of this Holy Week and Easter, but that which I experience twenty years ago at the Millennium in Cape Town, (where a great friend of mine was based at St George’s Cathedral) has helped me to find perspective on how we wait for freedom and resurrection to come. I can remember the day in 1990 when a member of my family who had worked in South Africa, turned to me and said *Have you seen the news – Nelson Mandela* has been released, and again I turned the television on to see and believe. In 2000 I took a boat out to Robben Island – where Mandela was imprisoned for 26 years and had time to reflect about what it must be like to undergo such in humane treatment for so long. If you’ve read *A long walk to freedom*, it’s deeply moving to hear how he suffered in his *Lock Down* and *Lock In*, but what kept

his hopes alive when they all but seem to have disappeared, was having hope and faith with others by praying and being supported by the community around him - both fellow inmates but also the warders. That's something the remaining disciples shared as they stuck together in their locked community – and something many of us are discovering by finding that the real, local community is what can support us in these times as we face fear and struggle, to wonder when we will be released. With others we may be asking big questions *how long, what will life be back, will my livelihood be able to survive, even ... will I die?*

Locking ourselves up is right for both the NHS and for our own health, but experiencing or revisiting the what seems eternal Holy Saturday experience of unknowing, is something we perhaps choose to avoid or escape from. In life most of us don't want to turn on and face the reality – whether it's disasters in Paris and New York in the past, or that which is in front of us right now and the future. Yet this Easter Season may feel like we're still on Holy Saturday and the Lock Down challenges us therefore calls us either get stuck where we are or to enter into the Easter Spirit; let's therefore try and take the latter and search and prepare to find Jesus, his spirit and his message amongst us and to see the real Christ amongst us alive today, in a different disguise or time as he appeared to Thomas or Mary Magdalene. And we need that at a time when what we see is the sad reality of images of despair witnessed through 24/7 media with endless speculation creating of anxiety and doubt. Perhaps it's the words that Jesus says to his disciples and to us, that it is practically and spiritually '*Blessed*' - to have '*not*' seen at times, that we can find the way forward, by quietly praying, reflecting and giving time to work Christ's presence amongst us with those around us; as we have witnessed with the communities on Robben Island or the Ile de Notre Dame, or being with the Disciples who surrounded Thomas, and being with the people that surround us now – in the dark times we can be strengthened in learning, sharing and serving each other in how we go forward to have faith to face the future. In doing so, others can help strengthen *our* faith with how to trust and find God to be a light to take us forward when the path seems dark or dead. As Mandela himself wrote: *the challenge (for every prisoner) is how to survive intact and how to emerge undiminished, how to conserve and even replenish one's beliefs.* P463.

His words can help change and transform our attitudes in how we can prepare to meet Christ in coming to us now or when we are free, and both brings the hope of resurrection to us and how we can offer it to others. And when we do that – the future can be different – if we look at what happened in RSA surely it was Mandela's faith in Christ that led to the very 'resurrected outcome' that was to follow. He could have reprimanded those who had evil's worst to him and the

country, but the answer was *truth and reconciliation* – where what we saw wasn't trials of the century – but weeping and tears from the *Mary Magdalenes* victims coming forward to bring forgiveness and peace. As spring will eventually spiritually come, we have to think about how we will react or hopefully not blame others in the future – and that our response can arise as we think not just about what we've personally lost, but how we will go in a different direction and meet Jesus and the unknown. on the Emmaus Road now and in the future.

Despite the inconvenience and pain, I pray that we can use this Lockdown period as a space and period to learn and grow in our '*island*' community – that we may learn to encounter the fears and see answers for our lives not by what we see to satisfy our needs, but by which God can enter us in our doubts and solitude. For through them, when we do meet again and greet each other, it may be in a spirit strengthened by an encounter with our physical loss, but because in the spirit and words of William Penn, *we have encountered God beyond the horizon, and the horizon is only the limit of our sight*. May he bring us hope and that through his presence revealed in love and service, we may find the strength for our faith to live through these imprisoned times and that through our community we can be supported to see new life with doors unlocked and in turn welcome Christ's presence to lead us to freedom when it comes.