

Christmas Day 2020

If I begin this sermon with the phrase “When I was on a zoom call with clergy the other day ...”, and we look back twelve months to last Christmas, we could hardly believe or anticipate what we have lived through. Most of us knew nothing about zoom: if only we had had a little flutter on the markets!

So when I was on a zoom call with clergy the other day, we talked about a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, partly about ourselves, but also about the Church. It reminded me of the book *Facing the Darkness* written by Sheila Cassidy, who founded St Luke’s Hospice in Plymouth. In a series of three sketches, she imagines doctor or priest with a patient or penitent, firstly with their uniforms and professional resources, then without uniform but still with resources, and then without either, so that both parties are stripped bare. She writes: ‘Slowly as the years go by, I learn about the importance of powerlessness. ... The secret is not to be afraid of it – not to run away’.

So we have all become less powerful, more vulnerable, more anxious, and we’ve done a lot of waiting, Advent-like. And to extend the liturgical metaphor, there has been quite a bit of Holy Saturday, in the tomb, waiting for resurrection. One of my clergy colleagues suggested that institutionally at least, this has been good for us. It has forced us to think who we are, why we are, and what we might be doing as a result.

You’ll already have spotted where this sermon is going this morning. Given the celebration of the birth of a child, the centuries of images of manger, crib and stable, it’s almost shocking that we don’t make more of that child’s vulnerability and powerlessness. We tend to relegate it to the level of a fairy story, which goes hand-in-hand with Father Christmas, to be relinquished as we grow up.

If we sit with this image a bit, if we don’t run away and try not to be afraid, there’s something to be learnt; that we are often used to being the powerful ones, the active ones, and now in this pandemic we’re learning to receive, passively. We’re experiencing directly and in our bodies what many experience through frailty or disability.

At the end of his life, Jesus returned to that sense of powerlessness and vulnerability in which he entered the world, as he was done unto in terms of his suffering and crucifixion. So there is something very significant about meeting God in these conditions, that vulnerability is a ‘thin place’ where that divine encounter is more likely and more profound.

There have been some other benefits as well. I love the humour, the images and memes that have gone round by phone or on-line, even some of the blacker ones. Personally, I relish the comment that was made to me in the first lockdown. I suggested outside on a narrow path around the Quay that a pair of walkers might go single file. The response – now bear in mind that I was on my own – was why didn’t I walk in single file? I was rendered speechless, quite a feat.

I am also grateful to all of you for support and energy, for the willingness to get hands dirty, literally and metaphorically; for volunteering for reading and praying in our zoom services, for being flexible with how we do these Masses; for creativity and imagination in our staff team. These are small signs of light in the darkness, of new life, resurrection. And so this really is a Eucharist of gratitude, our thanks to God for still being Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Happy Christmas. Amen.