

Morningside            Sermon            10.30am            9/4/23

An everlasting love            Easter Sunday

*Jeremiah 31:1-6; John 20:1-18*

Before they became part of our Bible, the stories we read in it were lived, in part or in totality. They were told by and listened to real flesh and blood people who knew what was being talked about, or knew someone who did, or shared a family or community tradition that told the same story. That seems lost to so many of us. Once they became cemented within the pages of Scripture, they no longer smelled of the real world. The events of those distant days decorously encased in distant stained glass, or set to beautiful music which pleases for a moment, and then is gone on the ether.

Just as we have Disneyfied so much of the nativity story at Christmas, so we have watered down much of the rawness and edginess of the Easter story either because of time elapsed, or the simple truth that it is hard to grapple with, or unpalatable to modern sensitivities.

It's gory. It's confusing. It's unsettling. It's far-fetched. But it's still there, and despite the best efforts of two millennia, that unavoidable feeling that *something* happened, something momentous, something life-changing, something world-altering, simply will not go away.

There is nothing wrong with the beautiful things that are made and done and offered at Easter time – it is a time to celebrate and rejoice and be glad. But Easter goes deeper, wider, higher than the traditions that have grown up around it. We can't quite get a handle on it. Apart from that unavoidable feeling that *something* happened.

In the cool of the morning garden. In the emptiness of the tomb. In the folded graveclothes left behind. In the running to and fro. In the contradictions and uncertainties and the incomprehension, *something* happened.

I doubt if it will ever be explained by biology or physics, or seismologists pondering how an earthquake might roll away a heavy stone. It was not explained at the time of the event when frightened, suspicious sceptics put the story round that a body had been stolen, when none was ever found or produced, dead or alive, to discount the story. No re-arrest was ever made. But *something* happened.

Every time you try to grasp a fact, or a statement, like smoke they twist away from our grasp. To try to do that, I believe, misses the point of the Easter story. The question we should not be, "Did this happen or not?" but rather, "What do these stories mean?" *Something* happened, I firmly believe, and the questions I wrestle with are *why* did it happen, and what difference does this make to the way I shape my life.

Which is why I find myself this morning thrown back to this passage from the 7th BC prophet Jeremiah on this holiest day of the Christian calendar. Back to the pages of the often-misunderstood and set-aside Old Testament, where the 2,700 year old curmudgeon Jeremiah, without wonderful banners, and Hallelujah choruses, and Easter treats points me to something I need to return to again and again and again. What the Easter story means, and why it happened, can be found in the phrase Jeremiah attributes to the God of the Old Testament speaking to frightened, exiled Jews, recalling their ancestors' enslavement in Egypt. Who survived the sword of persecution. Who found grace, and sustenance, and even hope in a wilderness, learned something even more about their God. How could the people of the 7th BC, like their forebears, live through the trauma of destruction and exile and retain the hope of a future with God. How can you and I live in a time of economic, social and political upheaval where the shifting sands of integrity in high office, honesty in financial dealings, compassion towards the weakest and most

fragile in the people of the world, as well as the care of the most vulnerable in our communities is under constant threat. How can we retain hope in God, and faith in God?

"I have loved you with an everlasting love", says God. And God's love, bridging the generations, warming us in the coldest of times, strengthening us when weakness undermines us, heartening us when despair overwhelms us, giving us a shake when cynicism grips us, reaches out to remind us of God's presence, God's care, God's inspiration.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love", says God. Not once, not for a trial period, but forever. To be loved is to be remembered, and not forgotten. To be loved is to be named, and seen as distinctive, and unique. To be loved is to find you are not on your own. To be loved is to be given enough courage, enough hope, to hold on a bit longer, to take that next step, to believe that things will get better, or that if that seems too much, that we will be able to cope, until things sort out, settle down, transform.

Easter Good News is to come to feel, if not fully think out, or understand, but *to feel* that God's everlasting love is the foundation of everything that exists. It permeates life, Creation, darkness, brightness, music, art, literature, generosity, kindness, healing, consolation, peace, vision, determination, imagination.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love."

At Easter, this is God, confirming all over again, through the resurrection of Jesus His Son, that His love for the world is complete and confirmed. This is God saying that by this sign, the resurrection of Jesus, God will take us to have and to hold, from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, for as long as you live. And when this life ends, God's everlasting love will carry us beyond, to the place of blessing, wherever that is, whatever that is, because God will love us through death, and into the life that is to come.

It is said, with an element of justification, that when you try to explain why a joke is funny, you lose its humour. I wonder if something similar is the same with love. So much of love can seem so ethereal, so hard to pin down, so beyond common sense and reason and logic. You love because, well, you just do. And to break it down into its constituent parts diminishes or dissolves the essence of something that is hard to explain, but that the something is there, and real, is undeniable. You *feel* it.

Might it not be the same with the resurrection? It can never be reduced to individual bits and pieces, to be reassembled and revived when we choose. It is just there. This great experience of joy, of hope, of mystery, of everlasting love.

It's not always easy, love never is. God's love may be everlasting and the ground of existence, but it often goes unrequited even when poured out on humanity. God's love is unconditional, but our love is predicated upon conditions. God's love is spontaneous and unmotivated, but our love is acquisitive. God's love continually reaches out towards us, searches for us, calls to us and invites us, but often we reject it, or hide from it. We can't quite believe it is true. We can't quite believe that is meant for us, just for us, just as we are.

But it is, and it does. God's everlasting love. Whether we like it or not. God has long been in the business of breathing life, and love, into the lifeless and the unloved. Maybe that's what God was doing with the lifeless and unloved Jesus in the tomb, to show, somehow, to the world, that this is what God is about.

Might God be about to breathe life and love into our lifeless and loveless political world in the Scotland and the UK? That's a lot of blowing and kissing, but God might! Might God be about to breathe life and love into what feels like our sometimes lifeless and loveless Church in these hard days of change and reimagining and exhaustion? That's a lot of blowing and kissing, but God

might! Might God be about to breathe life and love into you, and me, with all our potential and brokenness, with all our faith and doubt, with all our desire to do and be the right thing, and the reality of our inconsistency and failure? That's a lot of blowing and kissing, but God might!

What do we learn from that old grump, Jeremiah, over two and a half thousand years ago, on this Easter morning in 2023? We can learn that we can sing our hallelujahs despite a world that is hardly inclined to sing or finds very little to sing about. We sing because we know death is not the final word, and despair is not the winner. We sing because the world does not have to be the way that it is, and that things can and do change. We sing because we are loved, with God's everlasting love.

On Easter day, and every day.

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

**Amen**