

“where true joys are to be found” (Collect)

There are many mistaken ideas around Christianity, and one of them, found both inside and outside the Church, is that Christians ought to be miserable. The word is dangerous; when we confess that we are “miserable sinners” the word “miserable” does not mean unhappy (that may or may not be the case) but in need of God's mercy. Which indeed we are, and always will be in this life; but “to the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses”. So we stand before God giving thanks because we have received and do receive that mercy.

The Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord (I do not think the early Christians distinguished them as two separate events) mean among other things that the Father has through and in Christ accepted us back - that the barrier formed by our sin has been broken. This is good news; of course we respond by giving of thanks (hence the Eucharist – that is what it means). Our natural condition in Christ is one of joy. The fall of man is undone.

So we say that one true understanding of Easter is God enabling us to live a proper human life. But we still have to find out what that is, and to do it, with his help. Jeremy Taylor, a victim of parliamentary persecution, wrote two large books, of “Holy Living” and of “Holy Dying” while prevented from exercising his ministry otherwise. You would not expect them to be read out at length in a sermon, but perhaps the key to the first book had been found a few years before its publication in the poems of George Herbert:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

The periods of Anglican suffering in the seventeenth century were in some ways the most fruitful in spiritual writing; I also profit from Vaughan and Traherne. All of them have a sense of the blessings of God's created order and of what it is to be a redeemed human within it. In the later suffering of those driven out of the state religion by William of Orange, we have Bishop Ken, one of whose hymns we also use, summarising “Holy Dying”:

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the awful day.

For Easter does not take away the fact of death; it is natural in itself and even the youngest and healthiest of us should be preparing for it. We will die, but we can die with hope. Hope not just that our resurrection will be completed just as our Saviour's was, but also that no part of life, including dying, is without God's presence and help.

But, amidst all our difficulties, “true joys”. For in proportion as we open ourselves to God, we become properly human, making the response to God for which we were designed. This is what the Epistle tells us. We redeemed human beings are the “first fruits”, the chosen portion of the whole creation to make the offering back to God. We are the ones therefore who receive the perfect gifts from God. Our salvation, our perfection, has been His purpose from the beginning. Our task is to make that response. As with all new skills, this is hard at the beginning, and perhaps will always continue hard in this world, where so much is against the grain. Yet our destiny is begun here, even it is only finally experienced after death:

More blessed still, in peace and love to be
One with the Trinity in Unity.

We cannot usefully be commanded to enjoy ourselves; we cannot be forced to be happy and we cannot make ourselves happy. All we can do is live rightly and die rightly in God's world; but true joys will follow. That is God's promise.

The sermon is not closely related to the readings.