

Allelulia! He is Risen - he is Risen indeed! Allelulia

A long time ago, when I was first ordained, I had to take the 8 o'clock service, which uses the Book of Common Prayer - a service which was originally written in 1552, updated in 1662.

So its not modern English or easy to understand.

And the prayers - start by saying -

Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's church, militant here in earth.

So the first time I just read it.

Then after a few Sundays I think - but I'm a pacifist! This was probably written when Christians went to war with each other, and were all militant.

No - I'm not going to say it.

So I just said - the Whole state of Christ's church, here on earth.

A few weeks later, Doug comes up to me. Doug is about 80, going on 800, he has an amazing Wiltshire accent, but actually he works in aerospace. So don't be confused by the accent!

He says - I notice you've dropped the word. - militant Simon. Why's that?

I say - well I'm a pacifist, I'm not really keen on a militant church, onward Christian soldiers - no thank you!

So Doug, really kindly, just says - go and look it up!

So do you know what Militant means? You do, don't you, it was just me?

Militant - means using force.

And do you know what you need to exert force - you need a body.

And its here in the prayer book becuae Thomas Cranmer who wrote it, wanted to stop the catholic practice of praying for the dead members of the church - and only pray for the living, who could still exert a force!

So then I could say - pray for the whole state of christ's church, living here on earth.

But the door it opened in my mind though, was that the church, members of Christ's body, are not just those who are living on earth, it includes those who have gone before.

When we celebrate communion in a little while, we will say -

Therefore with angels and archangels, and **with all the company of heaven**, we proclaim your great and glorious name ....

Every time we celebrate communion, or worship - we are not alone, there are unseen beings with us - angels sitting on the rafters, our loved ones, and others in the company of heaven, who draw near, to join in our songs and prayers. We just can't usually see them, but they're there.

One of my favourite old testament stories, is the prophet Elisha, who is captured with his servant by an enemy army.

The servant was scared and says to the prophet - what shall we do?

Elisha says - "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

And Elisha prayed, and said, "Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see."

Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw.

And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

And then Elisha prays for God to blind the army, he leads them to another city where they are captured, but Elisha says don't kill them, give them a feast and treat them kindly - then they'll stop attacking you.

So at St James we've been on this journey this year to think about what it means to be an Inclusive Church, what's it mean to welcome all.

We've thought about disabled, ethnicity, about rich and poor, men and women, young and old -

We've talked about differences, and how we have to learn to live with difference.  
There's things we can do to our buildings to include people  
Or things we can do in services and events to make sure women or children have an equal part.  
And we've thought a little about what work we need to do inside, in our hearts, to include people.

After Easter we're going to spend several weeks thinking about sexuality - where our ideas come from and our fears, and what the bible says, and how we should proceed.

By July I think we'll be in place where we can vote, as a church, if we want to join the inclusive church organisation, and you can see on the news sheet what that means.

But today, because its the day that Jesus opened up the gates of heaven, that he made possible eternal life - I wanted us to think about how our church is already Inclusive of the living and the dead. There's nothing we have to do - I'm just making us aware of it.

And particularly because we miss Christine, rightly so, but I want to remind us that she is still part of the church and included.

Jesus said God is the god of the living, not the dead.

Before Jesus, there was only a whisper of a belief in life after death - many Jews today don't believe in it. Not like Christians do.

But Jesus was super explicit - whoever believe in me, won't die.

He says - I am going to prepare a place for you and will come back and get you.

And we don't know the mechanisms, the science - there's speculation even in Paul's letters in the bible - the dead are raised first, and meet Jesus in the air half way.

Or people have gone to sleep

Or John has people under the altar, impatiently waiting for the final judgement.

We don't know that stuff.. but we do know.. that with Jesus, life goes on - in some way or another.

I often say to people its like the difference between being in the womb and being born.

You think its great in there - warm, cosy, safe. You can't imagine being out and about, arms and legs, eating, drinking - so why will death not be like another birth?

The Christian faith is about our union with Jesus. Christ in us, us in Christ.

We join with him by baptism, we remain in him by bread and wine.

And joined with him, we go with him.

He dies, and conquers death, and goes into heaven.

If we're not united then when we die, who know what will happen?

If we are with him, then we join in his victory over death, and he takes us into heaven with him.

We get in on his free pass!

( story about Stan at Lords cricket ground)

On this Easter Day - we don't just celebrate with one another here, or even with all our brothers and sisters around the world - 3 billion apparently! But we join with all those loved ones who have gone before - Christine, and John, Keith Bell, Amanda Harris, John Cox, and myriad others.

One Inclusive Church, the living and the dead -

And all becuase -

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