Easter Sunday 2019

Easter Sunday is the greatest day in the church’s year. It is a day to celebrate victory and hope. A day of joy. But is it just wishful thinking and all about our need for the feel good factor.

The fire at Notre Dame has been the news story this week. One eyewitness said he wasn’t sure who started the fire, but he has a hunch!

The fire happened in Holy Week of all weeks. Many people have seen it as an Easter parable. The destruction of an 850 year old building representing the Christian faith symbolic of the church going up in flames, disintegrating in the heat of a secular culture that has no time for irrational faith and superstitious nonsense. Or a faith that has taken the blows but out of the dying embers endures, shining forth in the wreckage like the glistening golden cross over the altar in the burnt-out Cathedral.

I’m sure people will write their own interpretations. Thankfully no one was injured or killed. On one level it is only a building and buildings can be rebuilt. On another level it is more than a building and an icon of faith and a source of national identity for the French.

Crowds of people, many of them young people, watched the Cathedral burn and started singing hymns and reciting prayers.

I read the comments of one of them , a 22 year old named says Éloi, who said "As a French Catholic, I felt really bad after the fire so I see this vigil as a way to say that even if the flames destroyed the cathedral, we can rebuild it because the Church is made not of stones but is a living body." He believes the cathedral should be remade just the way it was, as a "prayer to God".

Maybe coming so close to losing something so precious, something familiar yet taken for granted that it will always be there, might make those people, those young people, reconsider their relationship to the Christian faith. Maybe.

There were stories of brave priests rushing into the fire to save precious relics, artefacts and art. They include what is said to be the crown of thorns worn by Jesus before his crucifixion and a tunic King Louis IX is said to have worn when he brought the crown to Paris. Millions have already been pledged to rebuild the Cathedral from high profile billionaire owners of organisations such as Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, Louis Vuitton, L’Oréal and oil giant Total.

Should we be troubled that so much money has been raised for a building in so short a time when so much could have been used for the needs of so many people. £18 million was raised for the Grenfall victims in which 72 people died. £700 million has been raised for Notre Dame in which nobody died. But then spending money on churches will always raise such questions. The disaster has led to [a surge in fundraising for black churches destroyed by an arsonist in the US](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-47961014) earlier this year.

Without doubt though, buildings and art can lift the spirit and be a focus for reflection and faith.

These last few days we have had some wonderful art by Phil summers and Ron Swanwick on display in this church as part of our Transformation Easter art event. It has allowed us to visually contemplate the themes of Easter and of faith. Those of you who took the time to come and view the art I’m sure will all have your own favourites and have your own thoughts about how the art helped you engage with your faith.

Easter Sunday is a wonderful celebration of our Christian hope. But I know, as a minster that I’ve talked with many people over the years on issues of faith and doubt. One of the most frequent objections to Christianity I hear is that it is too positive. It is escapist, or ‘too pat’. It is too optimistic and not realistic about life. So, someone said ‘I can understand why people want to come and hear that someday God will make everything better and that no one truly dies. The stories of the Bible and Jesus are certainly consoling. But in the end, it’s all just wishful thinking’.

We live in one of the first eras of history in which it is widely believed that a happy ending is the mark of inferior art. Why many are certain that, ultimately, life is meaningless and that happy endings are misleading at best. Life therefore would be better represented by paradox, irony, and a sense of frustration. Happy endings are all right for children’s stories, perhaps, but not for thinking adults. ‘Grown up’ art deliberately lacks narrative coherence and of course, any happy ending. Gritty dramas win the Oscars. Uncomfortable and disturbing art win the prizes.

Perhaps that’s the reason why Steven Spielberg was refused any Oscars until he stopped making movies with only happy endings. Yet his fairy tale endings movies are his most popular by far. Critics observe this and scowl that, of course, ‘escapist’ stories will always be popular.

A new film is about to be released about the life of JRR Tolkien, who wrote the Lord of the Rings. He had a theory about the abiding popularity of the stories the critics disdain. It was a theory that helped CS Lewis convert from being a staunch atheist to a committed and articulate Christian. Tolkien insisted that people sense that happy endings and positive art are not escapist but somewhat true to reality. In his famous essay ‘On fairy stories’ Tolkien wrote the mark of the most satisfying stories is eucatastophe.

Katastrophe is a Greek word for a dramatic, world changing turn. Eucatatstophe is the joy of deliverance, denying the ultimate final defeat. It is joy beyond the walls of the world, a joy that touches the heart’s desire, a moment that passes outside of the frame and lets a gleam of light come through. Tolkien claimed that people sense that such stories point to some underlying reality. As we read or watch them, we are being told that the world is certainly filled with danger, sorrow and tragedy but that nonetheless there is a meaning to things, there is a difference between good and evil, and above all, there will be a final defeat of evil and even an escape from death – which Tolkien says is the quintessential happy ending.

Tolkien was a committed Christian, whether that is airbrushed out in the film of his life we will have to wait and see, but he argues that the gospel story of Jesus is not simply one more great story, pointing to the underlying reality. Rather the gospel story of Jesus is the underlying reality to which all the stories point. It gives us more than a passing inspiration because it is THE true story; it happened.

Tolkien writes: ‘*The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of human history. The resurrection is the eucatastrophe story of the incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted true on its own merits.’*

The fact of the resurrection of Jesus is what makes the gospel story not merely a great experience to read, but a life changing power.

Imagine someone called Paul preaching to slaves in the ancient city of Antioch just up the coast from Jerusalem. And imagine him saying ‘Ah the resurrection is basically just an inspiring story, you know. It means that somehow good is stronger than evil. So, let’s be kind to each other.

Would it be possible that any of the slaves would say: ‘wonderful!’ this message transforms my life of grinding misery and oppression into one of triumphant hope.!’ Of course not.

But that is not what Paul said when he went to the cities of the Mediterranean. He said ‘they saw Christ and touched him. Those first disciples are dying because they believe He really rose. That proves the kingdom God is real and will triumph. If you believe, you enter his realm and power now. The story of Jesus changes our lives because it is true.

The other week the first picture of a black hole was released. It’s amazing isn’t it. We are told by scientists that it is larger than our Solar system. Its mass is 6.5 billion times that of the sun. It is 500 million trillion kilometres away. Scientists say this is a cosmic trapdoor from which neither light nor matter can escape. This is the event horizon beyond which all known physical laws collapse.

Imagine a place where all known physical laws no longer exist! We can’t - but we trust those in the white coats who tell us it exists. Science fiction/science fact. We believe there is a place where all known physical laws collapse.

Yet we are sceptical that resurrection didn’t happen?

Come on – use your imagination! Or do I need to start wearing a white coat rather than a clerical collar and perhaps then you’ll believe me?

The Christian gospel is not sentimental or escapist. Indeed, the Easter story takes evil and loss and suffering with the utmost seriousness. But it says we can’t save ourselves. Nothing short of the death of the very Son of God can save us. But the happy ending of the historical resurrection is so enormous that is swallows up even the sorrow of the cross. It is so great that those who believe it can fully face the depth of the sorrow and brokenness of life. If we disbelieve the gospel, we may weep for joy at the happy ending of some inspiring story, but the enchantment will quickly fade, because our minds will tell us ‘life is not really like that’. But if we believe the gospel, then our hearts slowly heal even as we face the darkest times because we know that, because of Jesus, life is like that. Then our griefs will be taken up into the miraculous grace of God’s purposes.

The theologian Robert Jenson argued that our culture is in a crisis because the modern world ‘has lost its story’. Like the spire on Notre Dame it has toppled into the fires of desolation. We once thought that life had a purpose, that there was something to live for and that there was hope for a resolution to our sufferings of the world. Now, many say, none of those things are true.

However, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died but rose again, that has been proclaimed for 2000 years, says different. It says that God is love and has come through Jesus to show that love to the world even unto death. Three days later he rose again and one day will come back again to usher in a renewed creation.

The gospel is the ultimate story that shows victory coming out of defeat, rescue from abandonment. And because it is a true story it gives us hope because we know life is really like that. The first Christians gave their lives because they knew it was a true story.

It can be our story as well.

God made you to love him supremely, but he lost you. He returned to get you back, but it took the cross to do it. He absorbed your darkness so that one day you can finally and dazzlingly become your true self and take your seat at his eternal feast.

This faith can be the art work that adorns your inner life. It can be the glistening golden cross at the centre of your heart, even if all around is destruction and chaos. It can be your centre of the universe more profound and mysterious, more powerful and awesome than any black hole.

I so pray that you will know in your heart that Christ has risen. He is risen indeed alleluia.

*Bibliography:*

*Taken largely from Tim Keller, King’s Cross, Hodder 2011, chapter 18*