

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



RESURRECTION HORIZONS

16 April 2023

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

Once upon a time there were two frogs. One frog had lived all his life in a well. He was surprised to see another frog there. "Where have you come from?" he asked. "From the great lake. That's where I live," the visitor replied. "The great lake," said the frog, "what's that like? Is it as big as my well?" The visiting frog laughed. "There is no comparison," he said. The well frog had never heard of the great lake. He had lived all his life in his well and was sceptical about this visitor. The well frog pretended to be interested in what his visitor had to say about the great lake. But he thought to himself, "Of all the liars I have known in my lifetime, this one is undoubtedly the greatest - and the most shameless."

Resurrection is having our eyes opened and seeing how things really are. And with that comes an expanding of our horizons. When resurrection strikes it's like living in a well and thinking that is the extent of the world, then learning that in fact there is a wide world out there, including great lakes and even oceans.

When the risen Jesus appeared, the disciples have their horizon expanded far beyond what they had imagined. This morning we remember Thomas in particular. Notice it's entirely understandable how, in his well of grief, Thomas couldn't accept what the other disciples were saying about Jesus being alive. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Today so much in our society says "this is it". Also, "live life to the full now, have as many good experiences as you can". Jesus' teaching is very different, and comes to life at Easter: "whoever loses their life will save it" - that is whoever lives from the "I am" in all things, rather than the limited 'me' I take my life to be.

Life has a habit of throwing eye-opening experiences at us. And sooner or later that includes the ultimate horizon: death. In our youth most of us believe death is a distant horizon. In middle age, we can be tempted to push it back further still – perhaps in response to the knocking of mortality getting louder. But sooner or later we are confronted with reality. In extreme old age, from what I hear, you might come to accept the reality. I once asked some residents at the care home Manson House. They were in the late 90s and said when you get to their great age you are no longer afraid of dying. I'm interested in how you get there – because I know I have some way to go. And it seems to me that the way of Jesus is somehow to learn to see beyond death, beyond our mortality, beyond my fear of extinction.

The mystics speak of "identifying with the universe itself" (Simone Weil) or seeing "a World in a Grain of Sand and Heaven in a Wild Flower (William Blake). "You never enjoy the world aright, til the Sea itself floweth in your veins, til you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars." (Thomas Traherne) This is about learning not to cling, relishing the temporary nature of existence, and living in tune with the nature of things. The wisdom traditions encourage us to number our days. And we can practice reflecting on impermanence and our mortality.

Some of you have noticed the shoes I wear on Sundays: these huge DMs. They were my brother's shoes, but his health meant he didn't get to wear them and they stayed virtually new. My brother

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used to join us in worship on the livestream in the nursing home where he lived, so when my brother died in December, I decided to wear his shoes on Sunday. A kind of physical expression of the communion of saints. To be honest, Si's death has shaken me to the core. He is the first of six siblings to die. And I've realised that I had presumed my siblings were a permanent part of my life. I often reflect on the impermanent nature of things, of existence. But there's a big difference between a mental exercise and an emotional experience. And I've realised how my siblings are a fundamental part of my identity which I had unknowingly presumed was permanent.

And this highlights how resurrection growth is often uncomfortable, often painful. The frog in the well refused to believe in a wider existence. Sometimes we have to be dragged kicking and screaming to the viewpoint where we see the new horizon. But it's where our Lord calls us to – to know what Thomas and the disciples came to know: 'My Lord and my God'. That we are part of the life of God that is beyond and around and within and above and behind. That the dimensions of this body and this life are but a small part of the multiple dimensions of God. That our true, deepest self is part of God's existence – eternal, beyond time. And that we can live out of that awareness, letting go of our fear.