

Easter Day, April 1 2018
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon preached by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich
The Right Reverend Martin Seeley
Text: John 18: 1-20

Let's stay with Mary Magdalene for a while. The others have left her, and she remains at the tomb. We find her bewildered, at a loss. She is weeping.

We do not have to look far, or think for very long, to see parts of our society and our world at a loss. We sense a loss of value, and of valuing, a loss of direction and focus, among some, even a loss of compassion, a loss of meaning. Fragmentation and division, alienation and demeaning are the result.

Whether we think of the state of the world, or wonder where we will be in this country by next Easter, or think about our own lives, or are perplexed by artificial intelligence and the rise of robots, there are times we seem at a loss. Not everywhere, by any means, and not all the time, but certainly some of the time and in some places.

Perhaps like Mary Magdalene, we can find ourselves staring blankly into an empty space wondering what on earth next. Wondering what now can be relied on, where our bearings are, feeling at a loss about who or what to depend. Maybe we find ourselves weeping seen or unseen tears at the injustices, uncertainties, anxieties of our world.

'Why are you weeping?' we hear the question, but the question seems pointless. The answer is obvious. So there comes a second question from the gardener. 'Whom are you looking for?' Well, the world is looking for answers, for some clarity, and something to rely on, to provide direction. But those are answers to the question, "what" – but the gardener's question is "whom," "whom are you looking for?"

Whom are you looking for? I carried this question with me as Bishop Mike and I embarked on our second Lenten Pilgrimage. Whom are you looking for?

We concluded our ten day and 80 mile pilgrimage on Thursday, Maundy Thursday. We had walked around the western part of the diocese, starting at St Stephen's chapel in Bures, near where Edmund was crowned on Christmas Day, 855, and then ending in this cathedral on Thursday, having walked via Sudbury, Long Melford, Clare, Haverhill, Newmarket, and Mildenhall.

It was our second Lent Pilgrimage – having walked from Dunwich to this cathedral last Lent – so now it's an established tradition, and we'll have to do it again next year. It is a journey of seeking – whom are you looking for? Seeking knowledge and understanding about our county, what is going on, what makes it tick, who are the people who make it tick. But under that lies that question, and it was as if each person we met was asking us the same question, whom are you looking for?

We met an extraordinary array of people, in churches, community groups, businesses small and large, institutions, and schools. And we began to glimpse at least part of the answer to that deeper question as we witnessed the passion and purpose of so many we met, passionate about what they were doing, a sense of purpose and determination about doing it, and often, a deep sense that they were doing this for the good of others.

School teachers and governors, crafts people and entrepreneurs, community activists and hospital and military chaplains, horse trainers and seed purveyors, and on the last day, coming into Bury, environmental conservationists, and the makers of all the Branston Pickle in the world. Passion and purpose and the good of others is what we found, giving us something of the answer to the question “whom are you looking for?”

And along the way we spent time with people who had faced or are facing immense challenges, personal and professional, who had suffered much, who had borne profound loss, and yet did so with a hope that was humbling.

In some that hope was tinged with a quiet joy that revealed that deep awareness that they could live in the present secure that the future was taken care of. Hope and joy, something more of the answer to our search, each person drawing us a little nearer to whom we are looking for.

We met people of faith and people who were reticent about faith, yet we saw in both passion and purpose, expressions of hope and joy. This was beyond mere survival or self interest or self-determination. It was for others, and often at a cost. Each person in some way showed us something of the one we were looking for.

And I found myself asking, as we walked, would we have found this without Easter? If Easter had not happened, if Jesus had not risen from the dead, would we have found people imbued with passion and purpose for the good of others? Would people endure pain and loss with such courage and hope and joy?

What would our hope be if Easter had not happened? Not just our hope in eternal life, in life that is fuller and richer in ways we cannot imagine than we know it now, but our hope within this life, the hope that enables us to move through tragedy, or set back, or hardship; the hope we hold on to when the world can seem so bleak; the hope that enables us to set ourselves aside so we can help others find hope. The hope that grows in us and becomes so solid that it can bear whatever comes into our path. The hope that enables us to embark on enterprises whose outcome is not assured but whose purpose we know is for good.

The hope that sets us free from the confines of what feels safe and familiar to reach out for the good of others, regardless of who they are. The hope that responds to people very different from ourselves, includes people very different from ourselves, to care for them near or far, recognising we are all equal in God's love regardless of anything we might have thought. So that we see everyone in our village or our neighbourhood and way beyond as precious and beloved.

Would we have found this without Easter? I don't think so. Indeed many we met would have said, what you see in me - the passion, the purpose, the joy and the hope - is true for me only because of Easter. Others would be hesitant to speak in that way. And yet we find these manifestations in some form or other in those of faith and those who do not espouse it. And I believe that is because after some 1500 years our society has been so shaped and imbued with the reality of Easter that even those who deny it are living out of its reality.

We may think of our society as secular, and swathes of people may declare as such, but this society and all of us within it have still been shaped, deeply shaped, by the reality of Easter.

Which brings us back to Mary Magdalene, to the point where she experiences Easter herself. Not in the questions, why are you weeping, whom are you seeking, but in the next word the risen Jesus utters. Her name. Mary. It is in hearing her name that she knows he is risen, that passion and purpose have returned a hundred fold, that her hope and joy now know no bounds.

And for us who declare our faith in the risen Jesus, we do so because in some way or other we have heard him call our name. We have known or discovered ourselves to be called by him, tapped on the shoulder, poked, cajoled, beckoned, drawn in, clearly or more diffusely, we have a sense that we are known and we know it is he who knows us. And we are caught up in the immensity of his resurrection, which has transformed more than we can imagine.

I finished the pilgrimage from Bures to Bury renewed in hope and joy, trusting in the power of the resurrection working in our world even though at times I am blind to it, renewed in passion and purpose to name the risen Christ where he reveals himself and help others hear him name them.

We are all here to rejoice, to rejoice that he is risen and that like Mary we know we are known by name, and that our passion and purpose, our hope and joy as we walk our pilgrimage abound from his risen life. We rejoice that in world that can be bewildered and

lost, we find in others passion and purpose for the good of others, hope and joy in the face of adversity in so many people. And we rejoice that we can follow Mary Magdalene and do as she does, as in the next scene she goes to name the reality of the resurrection to others, that they might hear their names too.

© +Martin Seeley April 1 2018