**Easter 2022**

**Online sermon for York diocese**

A few years ago I was visiting a cathedral which had better remain nameless, and before the high altar there was a rope keeping people at bay – the sort of thing that is greatly loved by many cathedrals, but thankfully not ours! - and a sign which read: “Keep out. Beyond this point is the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies”

As I stood there and beheld this succinctly worded denial of all that the Christian faith is supposed to be about, I thought to myself, I wonder if the Dean and Chapter of this Cathedral have ever read the New Testament. For the whole story of our faith leads to this point, that we do have a hope – what the Letter to the Hebrews calls ‘a steadfast anchor for the soul, behind the curtain – ‘where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered…’ (Hebrews 6. 19 & 20) The climax and meaning of the Christian story is access to God and peace with God and with each other. As the same letter goes on to say, “Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but heaven itself” behind the curtain that used to separate us from God. (Hebrews 9.24)

Let me explain.

The 64th chapter of the prophet Isaiah – the bit of the prophet Isaiah known to biblical scholars as Third Isaiah, i.e. that bit of the book that is written from exile and is longing for deliverance: begins with these words of powerful yearning: "O that thou wouldest rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64. 1).

And in the Greek version of the Old Testament the word that we translate here as ‘rent asunder’ is itself a powerful sounding word: *skizomei*. From it we get the word schism. It means ‘torn in two’.

In the gospels this word only appears twice. Both occasions are significant. The first is when Jesus is baptized. The heavens are torn open, ‘rent asunder’ and God speaks to Jesus his beloved and says that with him, he is ‘well pleased’.

The second is also in Mark’s gospel. As Jesus dies on the cross, we are told “that the curtain of the temple was torn open from top to bottom” (Mark 15. 38)

Now this is quite a big deal.

The curtain being referred to here, is the curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple. In this strictly hierarchical building, only certain people can enter certain places. They need to ritually cleanse themselves first, and offer proper sacrifices; and only the High Priest, and then only once a year, on the Day of Passover, and appropriately dressed and appropriately prepared can enters the holy of holies, behind the curtain of separation, taking with him the blood of the sacrifice. His job is to make peace with God. Or so it was believed.

This is what the Temple in Jerusalem was for. It was a place where sacrifices were offered, and where atonement was made with God. And it involved a lot of blood and a lot of death. Sacrifices were offered day after day and year after year. The whole place would have been filled with the howls of death and the stench of blood.

it is this curtain that is torn down. And it is torn down at the precise moment that Jesus dies on the cross. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus our Great High Priest “enters once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood… for this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 9. 12 & 15).

And the holy place he enters is not the Temple in Jerusalem, but heaven itself. This is what Easter is about. Christ, who laid down his life on the cross, which seemed to us on Friday so tragic and bereft, is now raised to glory. Mary Magdalen stood in the dawning light of the first Easter day and beheld Christ; not a resuscitated corpse, not a fleeting ghost, but the first piece of the new creation, the one whose life is lived in our life and who by his death and resurrection carries our humanity to highest heaven and paves the way to glory. He doesn’t go into the temple, because he *is* the temple! It is in him and through him that we now have access to God. On Easter morning it is as if God himself hangs up a sign on the Temple door saying ‘Closed. By order of the management. What you once purchased here is now available for free through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ’. And that’s why we don’t want any notices in church saying that some bits are more holy than others and belong to some people more than the rest. There is no citizenship or passport control around the font. There is no fence around the altar. All are welcome.

Brothers and sisters, the stone has been rolled away, the veil of the temple has been torn in two, Christ is risen and we are called to live to reflect this new reality in the lives we lead, which is why race hatred, homophobia, prejudice, intolerance, war and violence have no place in the kingdom of God. As St Paul puts it, writing to the church in Ephesus: Christ “has broken down the dividing wall that was the hostility between us… through him we have access to God” (Ephesians 2. 14 & 18). This is the meaning of the resurrection. It is the Easter joy, Christ’s story that we must and live and share in the world.