

For Power came out from him and healed all of them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I promise you, this Gospel will be the most hopeful thing you hear this week. Now that might not seem to be a particularly sane thing to say given we have just heard what is essentially a list of woes.

You might think, what on earth is he planning to read out if this week if this list of persecutions and promises of woe is the most hopeful thing he's going to hear? The gas bill? The proceedings of the General Synod? The timetable of the Great Western Railway juxtaposed with the trains they actually end up running?

I admit it might seem unlikely. Indeed, the sense that is achieved by the juxtaposition by Luke with the blessings that proceed it is very clear: we might even say these are curses. It is a reminder that Christ speaks strongly, with force. It is a reminder of what really matters. It is still, in the midst of that, hopeful. Why? Well, it's a reminder that God is so much greater than the ways of this world.

Those are cursed for whom life is defined by those things: by reputation or riches or earthly contentment. And we know that to be true. To define yourself by the things of this world, to seek to have recognition in worldly terms, invariably ends in tears. Why? Because this world is not perfect. If it were there would be no need for Christ.

These promises of woe serve as a reminder that at the heart of following Christ is not something for reputational gain, indeed it is very often actively harmful to our reputation. There have been times in Christian history, times in the recent past of the Church, there are still times now, when reputation plays too great a part in the calculations of the Church. When it overrides what is good and holy and true, but difficult. Woe to us indeed in such cases. Christ is clear that those who seek to preserve their reputation or riches at any cost will lose them. And so it always proves to be.

Let us go back to that phrase from the Gospel: 'for power came out from him and healed all of them.' Like so many things, it prefigures the truth of the crucifixion and resurrection, those events by which all of the failings- of our world and of ourselves- are healed. That healing is achieved by the power coming out of him, of the one who is more powerful than we can possibly ever conceive, giving himself up to the wood of the cross.

These words are more linked to the woes than we might think. The proclamations of Christ that may not seem to be comforting, but, it is a reminder that things which seem to have popularity, things which vaunt their own purposes in this world, will not last, will not be the things of the hereafter. The task of the Church is to point to

Christ- for he is alpha and omega, he is beginning and end, he is the one whose purposes do not, cannot fail- he is the one who is risen, the one in whom faith is not in vain.

Christ tells us these things to remind us that ours is not an easy faith. Our faith cannot be in self, nor can it even be in mere solidarity. It cannot be rooted in the merely human, it cannot simply be well vested altruism nor theologised politics. It cannot be a therapeutic deism which makes us feel warm and fuzzy. Instead it must have, at its root, resurrection. The idea that things shall be changed, the idea that life will triumph over death, the idea that at the root of God is abounding, life giving, grave conquering love. Otherwise, otherwise I fear, it is in vain.

It will not be long- less than a month in fact- before we enter Lent. Today is Septuagesima which marks seventy days until Easter Sunday. Seventy days seems like a long time and yet, we have a mirror today to what we will proclaim then: that Christ *is* risen, that he is risen indeed, Alleluia.

Yet, before all that comes Lent. The desert of the soul, that time of enforced distance from the rambunctiousness of Resurrection joy, that entering into the wilderness, that following in the footsteps of Christ. .Lent is a time when we give things up to move closer to Christ. Think, what are those things which appear to have power over you? Those things we value too much. Might you give them up this Lent? The journey, though a tough one, will lead us, inexorably to Christ. To the one who came among us and who suffered among us, who died as we will die but who is risen, just as he promises, faithfully, truly promises, that we will rise.

At that heart of all- all faith, all hope, all those acts of charity and love- must be that; the knowledge that Christ is risen. The distinctions we enforce, the ups and downs of the life of an individual or a community, the time in the wilderness- all these will pass. I cannot stand here and predict what is in store in human terms- for the world, the Church or for us as individuals. What I can proclaim, what I can affirm, what I and we can base every other act and hope upon is this- that Christ *is* risen. That is the unending truth- that which was and is and shall be: that Christ loves us and for that love underwent physical death so that cosmic death might finally be defeated.

That is the ultimate act of healing, that is thing for which power came out of him. That, despite the woes of the world, is the very heart of our faith. The cause for our hope. This is the most hopeful Gospel reading you will hear, because it puts everything in perspective. It reminds us that all earthly things will pass away. And what will be left, will be his perfect, healing love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.