



**Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 5 June 2016**

What does it mean to believe in a God who can raise the dead?

We're well into Ordinary Time now – the half of the year when we detach from the seasonal cycle that's tied so closely to the life of Jesus, and we look instead to the cycle of our own lives. Ordinary Time is about making connections between the salvation history we recall and celebrate from Advent to Pentecost, and the lives we live.

For the (nearly) two months of Easter, we've celebrated that our God can raise the dead. But in Ordinary Time, we ask – what does that mean for us? What does that mean in our lives? What does it mean to believe in a God who can raise the dead – in a world where children still die?

In our readings today, we see two stories that show us that our God can raise the dead; each with the same three characters. The mother, her dead son and the prophet. Each opens with those characters in the same position – the mother mourning her dead son, and the prophet prepared to do something. And each ends with a resurrection.

But on these two opening freeze-frames of the mother, her dead son and the prophet, we see another image – if we are familiar with the story of the Gospels and of salvation history, if we know the history of Christian art, on these mothers cradling their dead sons we see superimposed the image of Mary cradling Jesus. The pieta. There is a very beautiful and powerful example in the sequence of Forest Stations in the nave – you can probably picture it. Mary, her face hidden by her hair, clutches Jesus' limp arm to her. The nail in his palm projects outwards, sharp. Every line of her body screams in pain. This mother with her dead son is the image that both our stories echo – and just as the prophets in those stories restore the two sons to life, we know that Jesus is/will be restored to life.

But who is the prophet for Mary? It is Jesus himself, her dead son – or it is God, whose presence is not mentioned but always there – or, in fact, it is both; for the mystery of the Trinity tells us that God is Jesus, in Jesus' dying as much as in his rising. (And Ordinary Time, let's remember, is also the Trinity Season – our ordinary life is also life in the light of the Trinity).

And this means that the picture of Mary is different from our two stories. The prophet, for those mothers and sons, is someone external – he comes into the story of mother and son, of love and grief, from outside. He transforms it and then he leaves. But in the frozen picture of Mary, the prophet is part of that story. Part of the love, part of the pain, part of the death and grief – and then part of the resurrection. Risen to create resurrection. God is there in the suffering – and only after that can God be there in the transformation.

But the pieta is not the only picture that hovers in our heads as we hear the stories of grief and resurrection in today's readings. These pictures of mothers with their dead sons evoke other pictures – iconic reminders of the horror and waste of war, of poverty, of terrorism. Images of mothers and dead children by artists like Käthe Kollwitz and photographers like Dorothea Lang. Images from disasters and wars. Images of children lying dead on beaches, carried from rubble by emergency services. And pictures of ourselves and those we love, mourning loved ones who have died.

And we ask the question that I began with. What does it mean to believe in a God who can raise the dead, in a world where children still die?

This is an old question and it takes many forms. How can there be suffering if God is good? What have I done – or failed to do – to deserve the grief that I'm now experiencing? Why does God heal X but not Y?

It's an old question – but it's the wrong question. The pieta overlaid on the mother-son-prophet stories tells us that those stories are not typical. And the pieta overlaid on the images of suffering from our own experience tells us that God doesn't shrink from suffering. God enters into it. God's response to suffering is to suffer with us, to walk alongside us, to offer us transformation.

Not always – very rarely – the total transformation offered to those two widowed mothers. But transformation nevertheless.

Because, as the people of Nain say in terror and wonder, a great prophet HAS risen among us. God HAS looked favourably on his people – but that great prophet is Jesus, and that favour towards God's people is not simply triumph over all the pain of human life.

In the death of Jesus, in the pieta where the only place that hope and resurrection are present is the dead body of Jesus himself, God shows Godself present in all human pain: suffering with us, and offering us the hope of resurrection. Not always – very rarely – the instant healing and wholeness that is offered in our two stories. That's something God can do – but not something God's going to do very often. Not because God is not good – but because we are not good, and this world is not good, and what God wants is not to put plaster after plaster over the forever-reopening wounds of the world. No. What God wants is to transform the world, and us. And God does this by sharing our suffering, and inviting us to share God's grace. By entering into all the pain that we feel, and offering to help us transcend that pain: calling us into God's own work of transformation, calling us to work for the transformation of the world. God brings healing, wholeness and hope – but healing, wholeness and hope that have to come to the world through us, through God's people.

One of my favourite theologians, Bonhoeffer, said that “only a suffering God can help” – and people have argued about what he meant for decades. But I think he means that God, suffering in Jesus and on the cross, enters into human suffering. We can trust God to help us because we know that God is not remote from the pain of the world – our own griefs and the suffering of people everywhere, people who are still crucified by poverty, oppression and pain. Instead of choosing to stay remote, God chooses to side with innocent people who suffer – which means entering into and experiencing their suffering.

God in Christ is on the side of the oppressed and joins with human beings in their crucifixions – and, in joining us, inspires us to join in with God’s project of liberation. Because God is the liberator who conquers death and suffering – but who conquers them through the death of Jesus. God is the liberator who rescues and heals us – but by calling us to rescue and heal each other.

So we can believe in a God who can raise the dead – even in this world where children die. But our belief in a God who can raise the dead calls us to do God’s work – to build a world where children do not die. Empowered by God, called by God, and with God walking alongside us in all the pain that we experience.