**4th April 2021 - Easter Day
(St. John of Beverley, Whatton)**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and John 20:1-18**

It’s wonderful to see you all here today. I was so pleased that the regulations changed just in time for us to able to gather in this way once again, and to have our lovely choir sing for us – won’t it be an absolutely wonderful day when *all* of us are able to worship God in song indoors again? Although if you *really* want to sing today, you’d be so welcome to come along to Aslockton at 11am, where we will be having our second Easter service *outdoors*, where *congregational* singing is now allowed again as well.

I don’t think any of us would have thought, even in our wildest imaginings, last Easter - only a short time into the first Coronavirus lockdown - that we would *still* be in the position that we are now. That we’d have had so many extended periods of having to separate ourselves almost completely from others; that we would all – globally; as a nation; as communities; as families and friends; individually - have endured so much.

It’s been a dark time for us all, even for those of us who may perhaps feel that we have “got off relatively lightly” compared to other parts of the country; other socio-economic groupings or ethnicities. There have been extraordinary instances, however, of courage, creativity and kindness amongst it all; gleaming points of light in the darkness. I’m sure that each of you will have those that have touched you particularly. I was especially moved these last few days by the story of the 11-year old Devon boy, Max Woosey, who started sleeping in a tent in his back garden on March 28th 2020, in memory of two family friends who had been cared for in a local hospice. Max heard that all of the charity’s regular fundraising activities had all been shut down, so he decided to start a sponsored sleep in his tent, to raise funds for them. 365 days – and, apparently, seven tents – later, Max has raised over half a million pounds for North Devon Hospice.

What an incredible achievement, and statement of love and hope, and – although amazing in the way it snowballed - so typical, too, of much that has gone on during these extraordinary times. Max obviously also has a better relationship with tents than one of my fellow clergy, who wrote on Twitter last week that, to mark the UK finally starting to open up again, a group of her friends had decided to celebrate with a camping expedition together, inviting her to join them. She wrote that, in preparation for the trip, she’d started writing a list: “Item 1: Find new friends”.

Joking apart, though, this pandemic has thrown up dilemmas and questions and heartaches for all of us, that we hoped we’d have never had to encounter. Many of us, our friends and relations, have had to confront our mortality in ways we thought were a thing of the past in our country, or perhaps reflective of parts of the world afflicted by poverty, conflict and disease – but not here, surely? We’ve had questions thrown up for us about where God can be in all of this; how can God allow suffering to take place on such a scale?

Well, God’s answer to these questions comes in the form - in fact in the *person* - of Jesus, and most especially in what we call his Passion – the culmination of his life, the very first Easter, as he was betrayed by one of his disciples; tried and condemned by the religious and military authorities; and forced to die the most agonizing and humiliating death on the cross.

So much of what we see in our world around us breaks God’s heart. He made each and every one of us in his image, the Bible tells us, and yet there’s so much wrong with the world that comes about from how we live, not according to the way God designed us to be, in loving relationship with Him and with one another; but turning our backs on Him, and falling out with one another. But God’s not a God who made the world only to let us get on with it, whilst he sits on the sidelines. We see in the Christmas story that he sent his son, Jesus, to be *in* the world, starting out like we all do, as a tiny, helpless baby, and sharing all we experience.

And God does this out of *love*; love for each one of you and for me. Because, no matter how good in human terms we may be, we all mess up during our lives. We all have things we shouldn’t have done, and things that we should have done, and never did. And God looks at us, and it grieves Him – precisely because he loves us - that we all fall far short of His plans for us.

But the miracle of Good Friday and Easter Day is that, when God looks at us in this way, he can see not us, but Jesus, standing before him. Because Jesus, 100% God and 100% human, *and* completely perfect, steps in, in our place, before our Heavenly Father. What Jesus does on the cross, that first Good Friday, is to take every bad thing we’ve ever done – or good thing we didn’t do – onto himself. Whilst it should be *us* paying the price for everything, Jesus says, “No, I’ll take it all on myself.” The only thing I ask of you, Jesus says, is that you follow him; that you turn away from all that’s bad in the world, and place your trust; your faith, in him.

But that first Good Friday, too, it *looked* at the time as though everything had gone horribly wrong. Jesus, who’d been acclaimed as the people’s saviour only days before, had been brutally killed on the cross. All that he had stood for in his three years of ministry – healings and miracles; the transformation of lives and relationships; extraordinary teachings – appeared to have been crushed by the powers stacked against him. All seemed dark; all seemed hopeless; all seemed over.

But the message of that first Easter morning – a message that speaks to us perhaps more clearly than ever this year, after all of the darkness and pain of these past twelve months – is that there is *hope*; hope for each one of us; and hope for the world. Because, as we read in the Gospel accounts, the tomb in which Jesus had been laid was empty. At first, the disciples couldn’t understand what had happened – Peter and John stare befuddled at the stone rolled away, and the grave clothes lying on the ground.

And then all becomes astoundingly clear to Mary Magdalene, with one word. Jesus - *not* the gardener - but Jesus risen from the dead, calls her by name – “Mary” - and the scales fall from her eyes. She recognizes him, and she recognizes the enormity of what he has done. Because Jesus’ resurrection from the dead that first Easter Day has broken the power of death and sin over our lives.

We *understand* what hope looks like at the moment; the hope of so much better times to come that - without getting ahead of ourselves yet - we’re all celebrating, as it seems the amazing capability of our vaccine scientists has turned the tide against this dark Covid year. But this - stunning as it is - is hope in the *human*. For *all* that the vaccine means that we have extraordinary levels of protection against the virus, we’re all ultimately mortal; at some point, we will all pass on.

The joyful, loving hope of Easter is so much *more* – the promise of glorious new life, echoed in all Creation bursting forth, that we see around us this Easter morning. It’s a hope that’s not bounded by our mortal horizons, but one which stretches on with the risen Jesus into all eternity. Just as he, though divine, shared in our death by dying for us on the cross, so he invites *us* – me and *you*, to share in his life – eternal life, as he calls each one of us by name, just as he called Mary that first Easter morning. Will *you* follow?

Let’s pray…

Risen Lord Jesus, as Mary Magdalene met you in the garden

on the morning of your resurrection,

so may each one of us meet you today and every day:

speak to us as you spoke to her;

reveal yourself as the living Lord;

and renew our hope and kindle our joy;

in your almighty and eternal name I pray, Amen.