

Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on the Fourth Sunday after Easter (3 May) 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

‘Every branch that bears fruit, my Father prunes, to make it bear more fruit.’ Those words from today’s Gospel are about a principle of life.

To most of us, much of the time, the principle is hard to understand when it’s applied to ourselves. We can see how it makes sense if you apply it to a grape vine, a rose bush, a hydrangea like the ones we have in Cloisters. If you want the thing to flourish, you have to cut it back. Claire, the head gardener, will tell you about hydrangeas: you’ve got to cut them *way* back. To an untrained eye, it’ll almost look like you’ve killed it. And in those words from today’s Gospel, Jesus isn’t talking about flowers, or grapevines. He’s talking about people. This cutting back happens to us.

No wonder his words make us uneasy. How are we supposed to flourish by being cut back? Jesus says that’s how it works. How can we live by dying? That is even harder to fathom; but again, Jesus says that’s the principle. ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’ He said many things like that of course. The way for us to follow him, which is the way of life, is by taking up a cross – an instrument of death. When he spoke about the defining image of this death-to-life pattern, his own crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples certainly couldn’t accept it. Peter says to him, ‘God forbid’ – ‘this shall never happen to you.’ Usually we are no more adept than Peter was at accepting the relatedness of death and life that we see in the crucifixion and resurrection. Look at the pictures and windows in most of our churches. They tend to get stuck on one or the other, like we do. Usually on the crucifixion. Is that because crucifixion is easier to depict, or because perhaps we only half-believe in the resurrection? When I was a curate, the priest who trained me was choosing an object to put over one of the altars in the cathedral, and he was determined that it should be a figure of the *risen* Christ, because, as put it, ‘We’ve got *enough* dead ones around here.’

The message of Easter is that Christ is risen from the dead, and that what happened to him happens to us too. Death and resurrection. For me, one helpful way of laying hold of that good news, is by recognising the pattern of death-to-life, as it can be seen all around us, within human experience, again and again. When we proclaim that Christ is risen, we’re not just saying we have become persuaded about one isolated wonder that took place two thousand years ago. Nor are we even just talking about something nice that God will do for card-carrying Christians when they die. We are saying the most wonderful thing about how the world works, proclaiming that there is a pattern woven into the nature of things. We’re saying that death ultimately opens out into life, that we are *carried through death* by a loving power which will not be defeated by it. We’re saying death is not the end of anyone’s story – and we see glimpses of that good news on this side of the grave, often in the metaphorical deaths we go through in our experience: the heartbreaks, the loss, missed opportunities, painful twists of fate, the aftermath of foolish, or cruel, or destructive things we may have done.

As you can imagine, in what I do, I spend a fair amount of time talking with despondent, despairing, or wounded people who need resurrection within themselves, who are in a mess of one kind or another, for whom hope is just a word, representing something they simply cannot access. Over and over I have seen the reality of resurrection in cases where the person in depression or bereavement, addiction or compulsion, emerges from their predicament – sometimes months or years after I was meeting with them – but they have

come out the other side all the same, into newness of life. And often, I should add, quite independently of religious faith. The miracle of resurrection is no less likely to be seen in people who would not have said they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. But it keeps happening. It just does. Having been involved in pastoral ministry for the better part of twenty-five years now, I have seen resurrection too many times not to believe in it.

It's what Dostoevsky is illustrating in *Crime and Punishment*, which manages to be one of the most beautifully hopeful of all books, while at the same time also plumbing the worst depths of psychological darkness. As many of you will know, the main character, Raskolnikov, has committed a murder, and he is on a journey through experience, because of his crime, to resurrection. As a murderer he is inclined to hate his life, to despise it, to write himself off completely. The detective who has found him out, Porfiry, offers him the chance not to be immediately arrested, but to confess – which would mean a shorter sentence. Raskolnikov is scornful and despairing of everything: a shorter sentence means nothing to him. The detective sees right through him, and yet he also sees, deeply and wisely, *how the world works*. He tells Raskolnikov to trust life, essentially, to trust God. He says, 'plunge straight into life, without deliberation; don't be uneasy – it will carry you direct to the shore and set you on your feet. What shore? How should I know? I simply believe that there is still much life before you.' Porfiry turns out to be right. Raskolnikov makes a journey of resurrection, slowly, gradually over a span of years, to renewal and regeneration. He ends up proving just what Porfiry says when he tells him: 'It is the sacred truth that life will sustain you.'¹

The contemporary Franciscan writer Richard Rohr is talking about the same principle, he says a very similar thing about being carried to another shore, through inner darkness into fullness of life. He says, 'When you go into the full depths and death, sometimes even the depths of your sin, you come out the other side – and the word for that is resurrection.' 'Something or someone builds a bridge for you, recognizable only from the far side, that carries you willingly, or even partly willing, across.' This will sometimes happen, Rohr says, through God making use of our mistakes, making use even of evil, making use of death itself, to carry us over to fullness of life. He takes our patron Mary Magdalen to be an illustration of how sometimes 'the very failures and radical insufficiency of our lives are what lead us into larger life and love.'²

To dare to affirm this with the Easter proclamation that Christ is risen, is to say that the things which make us feel diminished – the cutting, the pruning, even the humiliation of failure and dying, including our literal dying – it is to say these things can all be transformed, transfigured, used by God (every one of them) in helping us flourish, grow, and live.

Those who were here for the Easter sermon I gave last year will recognise the Orthodox icon here beside me, of Christ's descent to 'the realm of the dead.' I've brought it back today not to point out all the iconography again, but to call your attention to one thing only, something to look for when you come up at communion time. Beneath the feet of Christ we see the broken gates of Hades, the ruined gates of the realm of death. What is left of those ruined gates, in this icon, takes the shape of a white cross. Cross and resurrection together in one icon. The cross is a kind of bridge, and it is also the base, the foundation on which the risen Christ stands in glory – raising all the dead to life.

¹ *Crime and Punishment* (Coulson Translation), Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (New York, 1975), pp. 388-89.

² Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: the Search for our True Self* (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. xxi, 180.