

Easter 2025

Luke 23:50-24.9

Preparing for resurrection in a time of death...

In a world of well documented suffering, an image that still has the power to shock is that of those prisoners in the notorious El Salvador jail to which the US is currently sending undocumented immigrants. This prison known as CECOT prison was built in 2022 to warehouse 40,000 people without access to visits, phone calls, education, recreation or rehabilitation. Prisoners are shaved and shackled, forced to walk heavily bent over, guards leaning upon their heads. You may have seen the images of row upon row of seated men -- their heads bowed as machine gun toting guards tower above them. In one of those rows today sits Kilmar Abrego Garcia, deported from the US in what Trump administration officials admit was an 'administrative error'. An error neither the President of the United States nor the President of El Salvador wish to rectify. No doubt Abrego Garcia is only one of many innocents who will be caught up in Trump's drive to fill every resident -- and would be resident -- of America with fear. Photos of CECOT are certainly cheaper than building that wall the President promised. And these images do a heck of a lot to silence his critics. This week even a Republican Senator, one of the most powerful people in the country, admitted 'we are all afraid'.

This is government from the playbook of ancient Rome. By the time Jesus of Nazareth was born, the Roman empire, under Caesar Augustus, had nearly reached the apex of its power and territorial conquest. How did they keep all of these millions of subjects in line? In part by devising the most public form of agonising punishment ever invented; Crucifixion. On hilltops, and along major roads, stood crosses upon which men in various stages of death would hang, often for days -- struggling to lift the weight of their heads -- from the

muscles impaled by nails -- before bowing their heads for the final time. A line of crosses could effectively keep a rebellious population in line.

The lines of bowed heads in CECOT cannot fail this year to remind us of Jesus of Nazareth. Take a look at the image on the front cover of your service sheet -- of Jesus in the very same position – it was painted by the Indian artist we've been studying here at St Andrew's during Lent, and it reminds us that the tools and postures of oppression are predictable. In every era, in every country, oppression searches for open doors - looking for people to shave, shackle, bend and break.



'Jesus the Gardener crowned with thorns' Jyoti Sahi

Jesus of Nazareth was just one of the countless victims -- whose lives are cut short. As we look at the violence raging round the world – even in the 'land of the free and the home of the brave' – what new insights, what hope, can the Jesus story offer?

There are a great number of answers to this question. But one thing which stands out to me as I read the account of the resurrection in

Luke's gospel this year, is the way in which the capacity to take in resurrection depends on a capacity to take in death.

We might be tempted to think that resurrection joy and hope belongs to those glass half full folks, who always look on the bright side of life. But actually the story of Easter morning begins with a very practical focus upon the dead body of Jesus. Who will take him down and care for the lifeless corpse? Ironically it is a member of the very Jewish Council which condemned him to death. Breaking rank, no doubt at great personal cost, Joseph of Arimathea goes right to the top, to Pontius Pilate himself, to ask for Jesus. Imagine the look on his colleagues faces as Joseph tenderly removes the nails freeing Christ's body from the wood. Imagine their comments as he gathers the bloodied body wrapping it in expensive linen. He is not only breaking rank – he is breaking the Jewish purity laws by touching a dead body. Imagine their horror as he carries the lifeless Jesus away and lays him in a tomb. If they were not fleeing in disgust, they were for sure telling him his career was over, cancelling his golf club membership, perhaps even threatening to send him to El Salvador for supporting Jesus – this so called 'dangerous terrorist'.

Joseph of Arimathea carried on nonetheless – and he was not alone. While most of Jesus' male followers fled the scene, women bravely accompanied Jesus to his death and beyond. Revd Jon, in his sermon on Tuesday evening, focused our attention on the crowd of weeping mothers who beat their breasts as Jesus trod the lonely road to Golgotha, stooped under his cross. All four gospel writers pay tribute to the women gathered at the foot of the cross. Luke tells us that women followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, oversaw how his body was laid and then went home to complete the burial rites by purchasing and preparing spices with which to anoint the body.

Then, Luke tells us, they rested. They rested on the sabbath according to God's law. I love that little detail, which signifies the importance of

taking time out to breathe – even in the most dangerous and upsetting times. These women rested. All day long.

And early the next morning, they lugged those spices, and ointment over to the tomb, a seemingly pointless gesture. What difference to the cause can a bit of spice, a bit of perfume make? What difference to a victim already dead?

Having paid such meticulous attention to the victim however, having refused to turn away from defeat, having done the practical and seemingly impractical gestures of care -- they are somehow, uniquely, open to the triumph of the miraculous. They see and hear and obey the angels. That is no small thing. Why is it the women who receive the good news first? Perhaps because they did not run away from the bad.

Entrusted with the message of the angels, they were the first evangelists – running and breathlessly explaining to a very sceptical crowd, of cowering men, that Jesus had risen. He was not in the tomb. He was, perhaps, alive!

Their bravery was rewarded. Their place in salvation history -- God's story of eternal hope – is assured. They are remembered every Easter as the ones whose commitment to the victim enabled them to perceive the victory.

This group – Joseph of Arimathea, and the various Marys -- they can still speak to a sceptical crowd. They are examples to those of us convinced that the future looks hopeless. They can inspire us when we feel powerless in the face of performative acts of violence designed to silence and deter. They can speak to us when we wonder how to go on living in the face of so much loss. And they can point the way towards an answer to the question -- 'how on earth do we prepare for resurrection?'

According to the Cambridge scholar Marietta van der Tol, an expert in oppressive regimes, Eastern European countries have long looked to the image of the Christ crucified to express how their lands, lives and hearts have been torn apart by bloodthirsty empires. After the infamous Oval office bullying of Ukrainian President Zelensky, she posted on Facebook the image of a Ukrainian poster showing Christ on the cross alongside the words: 'They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garments'. Below the cross we see Russian and American rulers shaking hands with one arm, holding bloodied knives, dollars and rubbles in the other.

Van der Tol wrote: ' In the suspense of death and dying the question is: will there be a resurrection? Is it possible to hold onto hope? Today this question is Ukraine's – if she must die, let us be like the women who grieved and cared for the wounds, let us be the angels who shone their light, the friends who will return after having run away in fear, and the women who don't want to leave his side. Let us be Thomas, who was convinced how pain is written in the body and let us be the friends who accompany on a journey that, despite all odds, leads to something new.'

Some very precious things are being snuffed out in our time. People. National boundaries and identities. Ideals which have sustained western democracies and the carefully constructed system of fluid worldwide trade. The very planet itself seems bowed under oppressive mountains of rubbish and pollution and an overheating atmosphere. The image on your service sheet cover -- Sahi's picture of Jesus, the gardener crowned with thorns' somehow captures the link between the oppression of man, nature and the divine.

Where are we in relation to this painting? Can we, faced with so much pain, so much injustice, find the strength to be a friend accompanying those who are defeated on a journey that, despite all odds, leads to something new?

It is possible to hold on to hope, even in 2025, because Christ holds on to us – in life, in dying, in death and on the other side of death. Look at the strength of his hands in this painting. What we need to do is to put our hand in his hand and keep company with him. In his strength we face the reality of our fears for the world – but in his light we begin as the scripture says ‘to see light’. We begin to perceive resurrection. For Christ did not remain bowed down under the sins of the world – he conquered the grave, he cleaned out hell – he leapt up high and continued the dance of eternity. Our artist Jyoti Sahi depicts this Christ in the image on the back of your service sheets – entitled ‘Risen Lord’. I invite you to turn your booklet over and spend some time now and later on this Easter day looking for the living, for the life, for your life, in that wonderful image of glory. The cross is not denied, but it is transformed -- As Christ reaches up into the divine embrace – we and all of creation – are included in the victory of love. The Christian message of resurrection is so all encompassing, and so infused with the power of the Risen Christ, that all other sources of hope tremble, grow pale, in comparison.



'Risen Lord' Jyoti Sahi

How do we open ourselves to this colour, this joy? Scripture tells us to pay attention to the victims, honouring them as did Joseph of Arimathea, despite the cost. To join with the crowd of fearless women, trying to stay as close as possible to Jesus, even when times get tough. To obey the commandments as best we can, to behave decently and rest regularly. To stick together, refusing to hide or surrender. And to keep our eyes and minds open to the possibility of resurrection so that when it occurs, and it will occur – we are part of it. We are there. We find the living Christ, wherever and however Christ next reveals himself. We rise up in his power, because that is the promise of God. **Alleluia. He is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

