

Saturday 31st March 2018
Easter Vigil

Liverpool Parish Church

Vigil Readings:

OT: Genesis 22.1-18
Exodus 14.10-15.1
Ezekiel 37.1-14

NT: Romans 6.3-11

G: Luke 24.1-12

I would like to begin by saying that, for those of you who heard or read my last homily, I do not intend to begin all my preaching by mentioning football; however, I do want to begin by mentioning something football related, a much talked-about issue of some controversy, and that has been the subject of discussion in this church: namely, the use of Video Assistant Referees, or VAR, to help officials in decision making during football matches (such as offsides, handballs or other kinds of foul play). One key aspect of this controversy is the effect that using Video Assistant Referees has on the experience of the spectators who are actually in the stadium; for the broadcaster Danny Baker, the problem is one of trust, that spectators in the stadium can no longer be sure about what they are seeing, or what they think they are seeing, until it is confirmed, refuted or revealed by an unseen panel of experts watching on screens in another location; Danny Baker fears that if the use of Video Assistant Referees becomes standard, spectators who are actually there at the match will begin to fundamentally doubt what they are seeing, and that such an undermining of trust could potentially devalue the experience of watching a game at a football ground. Yet it seems that 'seeing' and trusting are inextricably bound up, and the temptation to use Video Assistant Referees has proven too great: we want to 'see' better to truly believe, even if in trying to see better, we undermine trust in what we see.

But it has ever been thus, as our earlier reading from Exodus suggests: 'Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD'. The extraordinary actions of God in the Book of Exodus do not just serve to reveal God to the Egyptians, and are not just used against the Egyptians to help free the Israelites – they also serve to reveal God to the Israelites, to make the understandably reluctant Israelites want to be free from the certainties of servitude

in Egypt, to make them want to be free to worship God, to bring Israel back to God in covenant relationship, to make them willing to endure hardship and uncertainty for the sake of being with God, to make them trust in God. But, as we know, this trust doesn't hold, Israel's relationship with God is undermined by their lack of trust; Ezekiel is commanded by God to prophesy that even death is no obstacle, that God can raise the dead, that the dead trust of Israel can be raised to new life through the 'ruach' of God, the breath, the Spirit of God, so that they 'shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and will act, says the LORD.' So in these examples, faith, trust, comes from seeing, from experiencing; therefore, the question has to be asked: is this real faith, real trust, if it relies on such sensory evidence?

In our first Old Testament reading, we have an example of trust pushed to its limit as Abraham has to make a choice between the horrendous killing of his beloved son and his obedience to God; Abraham trusts in God, and is released from the seemingly necessary killing of Isaac. So from where does this trust come? Perhaps because Abraham has already experienced the actions of God in Creation in his own life, not least through the fact of he and his aged wife unexpectedly, indeed, hilariously, conceiving a child. But I also think that it has something to do with Abraham's relationship with God, a relationship expressed in the name that we are told Abraham gave to the site of his and Isaac's deliverance: YHWH yir'eh (Jehovah Jireh) 'The LORD will provide', or, more literally translated, 'God sees' or 'God looks out'; Abraham feels seen by God, known by God, and so he trusts God, and Abraham's son does not have to die. But God's Son did have to die; God was not only willing to make the sacrifice of His Beloved Son, He was capable of seeing it through. Abraham's obedience confirmed him as the worthy recipient of God's blessing, but our disobedience, our lack of trust, entails God's sacrifice of His Son, and through this, our disobedience, our lack of trust, is forgiven, redeemed, and we are blessed by God through Jesus Christ; the Resurrection is God's ultimate sign, and we are called to trust.

But trust was seemingly hard even for those who knew Jesus during His earthly ministry; our Gospel reading relates how Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome 'were alarmed' upon finding the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, and had to be reminded by the Angel in the tomb that Jesus told them this was going to happen; clearly they, and the other disciples, did not entirely trust what Jesus

had said, as it seems that no one expected this. However, these women, the first witnesses to the Resurrection, do not tell anyone what has happened, presumably for fear of not being believed (and perhaps because they didn't quite believe it themselves, despite seeing it); indeed, in Luke's Gospel account, the women do tell the other disciples, and are not believed, although Peter is prompted to go and check, perhaps by his very lack of certainty, and so witnesses the scene himself. And so we share in this witness to the Resurrection, God's saving action in Creation, God's ultimate sign, and we are called, as Christians to witness to it, to share this witness with others; yet we are called to witness to something that we, ourselves, did not see; but in witnessing to it, in bearing witness to the Resurrection, we are witnessing to our trust in God; we did not see the Resurrection, but we *know* the Resurrection: we trust God. For St Paul, in The Letter to the Romans, being baptised is an act of trust in God, as in baptism, we die with Jesus, because we trust that we are raised to new life in and with Jesus. As God identifies Himself with us through Jesus, we are called to identify ourselves with Jesus, and so identify ourselves as witnesses to Jesus; when God calls, we answer with Abraham using one of the most resonant recurring phrases in Scripture: 'Here I am'; and in so doing, we identify ourselves as being seen by God, as being known by God. So, although maybe we cannot ever fully know God from our perspective, at least, not in this world, not until we are face-to-face and in unity with Him, we can know that God knows us.

In his *Proslogion* of 1077-1078, Saint Anselm wrestles with this idea, when he says, in an address to God: 'I cannot look directly into your light; it is too great for me. But whatever I see, I see through it, like a weak eye that sees what it does by the light of the sun, though it cannot look at the sun itself. My understanding cannot take it in, it is too bright, I cannot receive it; the eye of my soul cannot bear to turn towards it for too long. It is dazzled by its glory, mastered by its fullness, crushed by its immensity, confounded by its extent. Light, entire and inaccessible! Truth, whole and blessed! How far you are from me who have come so close to you. How remote you are from my sight, while I am thus present in your sight.' We trust God not because we see Him, but because we know that God sees us, that God knows us. And Easter is perhaps the moment in the year when we can feel this with the greatest clarity, because God's ultimate knowing of us, the surest sign that God sees and knows us, is the Incarnation: the birth, life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As with Ezekiel's 'dry bones', God's Holy Spirit breathes new life into our

world, into His Creation, and we are called to witness to it, to witness to our trust in God: 'For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Louis Johnson