

Sermon: 2020/04/19 (Second Sunday of Easter, Year A) - Acts 2:14a,22-32, Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; &, John 20:19-31_BTR

In our reading from (the Book of) *Acts*, we find the former fisherman, the Apostle Peter - having become *very much* the leader of the early Church, proclaiming, with *unshakeable* confidence(!), that Jesus, his fellow Galilean, was, 'the Messiah': [2:31].

And the "lynchpin" of his argument - the "turning point" - is 'the resurrection': [v. 31].

And he says these things to an incredulous, *hostile* crowd.

A crowd that hadn't themselves witnessed the *hard* evidence to believe as Peter believed.

(As I believe.)

The "hard" evidence was, of course, *principally*, the empty tomb.

But it didn't stand alone as proof.

Notice that Peter lists too - I quote, 'deeds of power, wonders, and signs': [2:22].

In other words, the case for Christ was *accumulative*.

And much of it, then, was already *firmly* in place *before* Easter (day) - "already" pointing to that final, most *magnificent* miracle as an *inevitable* conclusion:

Like a soaring steeple on a cathedral or the grand, gold-leaf covered dome on a Byzantine basilica, which are placed very last in the order of construction and decoration.

If you were to visit those structures when they're being built, you can see where the roof goes:

it's obvious.

You build from the ground *up*.

What's below draws our eye upward.

And until it is in place - the roof, it is conspicuous by its absence.

I say this, yet Peter had *not* seen where Jesus' ministry was headed.

Not until it took place and the Savior was standing in front of him, looking directly in his eye, saying, "'Peace be with you.'" A[nd a]fter He had said this...[and] showed them His hands and His side', remembers John: 'Then the disciples rejoiced.' [20:19-20a]

That (word) - "then" - is *very* revealing.

And, for Peter, it changed everything.

It set him on an *entirely* new course; a new journey - *quite literally!* MAP

The New Testament tells us that he left his humble home; his birthplace, and went north to (Syrian) Antioch: [Gal. 2:11], spreading the Faith; evangelising strangers; founding churches.

Then, still doing the same, he went west, into Asia Minor, (now "Turkey"): [1 Pet. 1:1].

Even further, to Corinth.

And, finally, to Rome.

Where he met a dreadful and *excruciating* fate, crucified upside down.

And you might think. hearing this: "Oh no! What a disaster: the first leader - or "pope," if you prefer - of the church, killed."

Surely, that was a "torpedo" to the movement; a set-back for Christianity, right?

And all the other leaders were executed too.

Paul; all the James-es; Thomas in India.

These deaths *should* have crippled the Church - *devastated* it, beyond "repair."

But, as I preached last week, it kept on growing - and at an *awesome* rate.

And that growth in the face of the *systematic* assassination - by the authorities - of Christian leaders, demands explanation; a "cause."

And whatever it is, this "cause" *may* be something which is *no longer* in effect *today*.

Thus the Church "today" may discover, in due course, that we're *less* resilient in the face of the deaths and the suffering we're seeing right now because of Covid-19.

Our businesses and places-of-worship being under "lockdowns."

Will we recover?

Are we *guaranteed* to "bounce" back?

If we're complacent, not necessarily.

Not St. Matthew's.

And not many small(er) congregations like us.

Not if our *strategy* is no more than crossing our fingers.

"But what about God's plan?" you ask, that there will be an "elect" reigning with Him forever in a new creation - a new creation free from sickness?

Well, yes, *that* is a *sure* thing.

(Global) pandemics will prove no impediment *whatsoever* to God's "End Times"-triumph.

And yet, how can I say that when, only a few weeks ago - in my sermon on March 29th, about the raising of Lazarus - that, despite, supremely, being "in charge," God does *not* control everything that happens: [n.1].

(Such as who is infected by a pathogen and who survives.

Such as who keeps their job, and who is fired.)

As an aside, I want to add that the proposition that God isn't in control of "everything that happens" is important to preserve His *good* character: for a "good" person - especially a *divine* one - does not spread viruses and panic.

And certainly doesn't do this *habitually*, even if this is for some "greater benefit," for that would mean some of us are merely "tools;" merely expendable. But God so loves *all* of us, which means loving us *equally*. It is this *even* distribution of His love *across* the entirety of the human family which prevents Him from using the nonconsensual suffering of any subset (of that "family") in some utilitarian fashion for the sake of the majority.

Now, back to our main question:

How could this be true that God does *not* need to control "everything" to bring about His plan of establishing the Kingdom?

This is a valid question:

In a sporting match, a team wins not just by playing well themselves, but, *additionally*, by manipulating and constraining their opponents' game. In soccer, that's why any one side has both specialised "defence" *and* "strikers," who exercise very different roles on the pitch - no team wins, which focuses on only one aspect whilst neglecting the other. And there has always been a tradition of theology that argued God, therefore, contrary to the appeal of the Lord's Prayer where we *ask* for Him to perform His will, has decided upon it beforehand in minute detail, and sees it through by allowing no randomness or chance - and no free will, really.

Well, there's at least two ways that the God of the Bible - that is to say, our God; the true and real God who reigns, *can* permit something like widespread sickness and a potentially corresponding decline in the Church *whilst* bring about the ultimate hope of the Gospel.

Firstly, by His omnipotence; His limitless strength and might.

(And let me **DIAGRAM** this for you.)

Here is the chaos of human decision-making.

Sin. [Pause.]

Disease. [Pause.]

Joblessness. [Pause.]

Unhappiness.

[Fig. 1] But, like an unstoppable bulldozer; an ice-breaking ship that *smashes* its way through frozen Artic waters, or a snow plough on a wintry road; there is no power on earth that can prevent God from *driving* His agenda forward, even against opposition; against resistance.

And, sometimes, the Bible gives us *exactly* this impression of Him doing such:

In Egypt, for example, when He, *personally*, flew over the houses of the slave-owners in the final plague: [Exo. 11:4, 12:12,23 & 29].

Then, at the Red Sea, God, *personally*, fought pharaoh's chariot-army, which was

pursuing the Hebrews, giving the refugees time to escape through to the other side - I quote, (from *Exodus*, chapter 14), 'The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against [us]."'
Indeed, God says to Moses and his army, "'...you have *only* to keep still.'" [v.25]

Later, in Canaan, God again comes out *Himself* to do battle; to clear the way so His promise to Abraham might be fulfilled - of a free land for a holy people more numerable than the stars: the prophetess, Deborah, sang about how, at one of the most important confrontations with those previously living in the land, I quote, (from *Judges*, chapter 5): '[The] Lord, ...marched...[and] the earth trembled, ..the heavens poured, ...[t]he mountains quaked...' [v.4-5a]
In particular, she describes Him using the stars as a cannons, to pummel the pagans: [v.20].

But the idea of God having need to *exert* His plan might seem to you, well...not especially godly.
As being...beneath Him perhaps.
Less than...dignified for the one who created the universe.
Just picture a bout of boxing: both pugilists, even between fighters of disparate skill, tend to get bloody and bruised.
Hardly ever does one of them walk away having sustained no damage whatsoever.
And in response I say: *right!* Like Jesus on the Cross.
Our Lord took some hits.

But our omnipotent God is also an *omniscient* God, who anticipates *every* move, *every* choice, *every* event including the bad ones; the natural disasters and the *moral* disasters.
Indeed, an *omniscient* God can use those things - our mistakes; our mis-fires and "wrong-turns" - as the *very* pillars; the "launchpads," to move the whole plan forward: [Fig. 2].
Transforming and *resurrecting* "dead ends," "lost causes" and murdered Messiahs.
And so, an uneducated man; a man who doubted; a fearful and ordinary man; an immoral man: *Peter*, that is - but also you and me too - can contribute; even our deaths and hurt - can become essential, no less - to the *glorious* victory that God has determined *will*, (eventually), come to pass.
Let's not despair, then.
But, like I said last week, get "excited": [n.2].

Footnotes:

1. See: http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sermon-20200329-5th-Sunday-in-Lent-Ezekiel-37v1-14-Psalm-130-Romans-8v6-11-John-11v1-45_BTR.pdf
2. See: http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Sermon-20200412-Easter-Sunday-Jeremiah-31v1-6-Psalm-118v1-214-24-Colossians-3v1-4-John-20v1-18_BTR.pdf

Figures:

Fig 1. An omnipotent God: “the Bulldozer.”

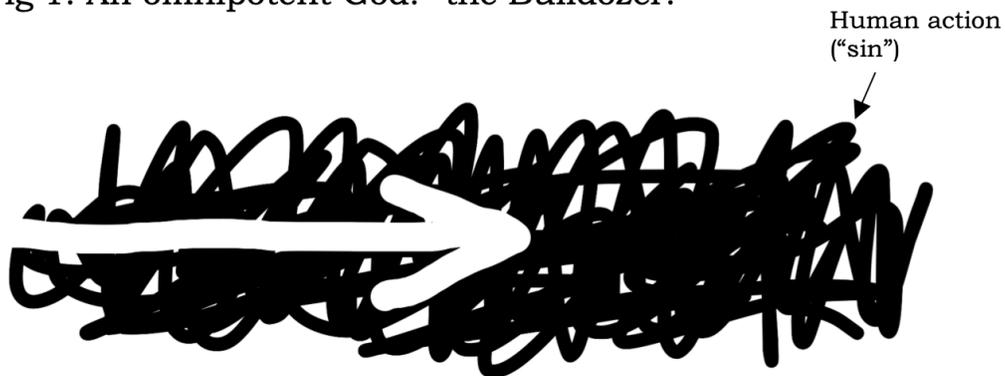


Fig 2. An omniscient God

