

(Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30)

Three weeks ago we were anticipating the *Black Lives Matter* rally in Richmond Market Place that afternoon. Today, we are anticipating the national celebration of 72 years since the foundation of the National Health Service.

For me, the symbol of the Rainbow links both events. Twenty years ago, I was in exactly the same situation as Paul is now: just starting out as a new curate. My final few months at theological college had been in South Africa, at the College of the Transfiguration in Grahamstown – home of the world-renowned Rhodes University. This African University still bears that name.

In South Africa I learnt from the inside about the long struggle against apartheid, and the place of the Church in that struggle, positive as well as negative. I learnt about that nation's new sense of identity as 'the Rainbow Nation' – with its eleven official languages. In the college community I was the only white student, a transformative experience for me. In the college chapel there was a huge cross behind the altar, bearing a black Christ – and how could it have been otherwise? I learnt about liberation theology 'in context', and about so-called 'black theology' – the existence and message of which we seem only now to be really waking up to in this country.

So I must admit that when I see the Rainbow symbol used for the NHS I think immediately of South Africa. We all know this symbol has been used by many other groups as a sign of peace and solidarity, and long may this remain so – especially where there is a legitimate ongoing struggle for recognition and justice. But at St Mary's we are mindful of 'Rainbows' being the name of our toddlers' group, and how we miss the life they bring to our church!

You may be interested to know that the Hudswell Bell which was rung at the start of each Rainbows service has now gone to its new home in Calstock, Cornwall. In exchange, we have received from St Andrew's church in Calstock a lovely set of handbells for our Little Rainbows to ring – Rainbow bells in rainbow colours!

The name 'Little Rainbows' was inspired by the rainbow within Ruth's Window in St Mary's Church, which in turn was inspired by the symbol of the covenant in the Old Testament story of Noah and the Flood. In today's Old Testament passage we heard about another covenant, in blood, as we were reminded of the ancient prophecy of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem: a King riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

If that image shows the world's values being turned upside down then it points us straight to the Cross – whether for us it carries a black Christ, a white Christ or any rainbow colour in between. For Christians, the symbol of death becomes the symbol of life in its fulness, for all.

Now the logo of the College of the Transfiguration is a cross which bears the inscription ‘The truth will set you free’ – from John’s gospel. That statement summarises very neatly the message of our second reading today, read for us by Paul from the letter of his namesake to the Romans. ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me..?’ writes Paul, the Apostle. And then he says, ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says, ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’

A priest’s stole is in the shape of a yoke – deliberately so. When I ‘take’ it, I need to recall those words of Jesus – for it is by his grace alone that I can do what he has called me to do. And the same applies to any of us, including Paul – who can, we hope, in October be ordained as a deacon, and thus wear his stole as a sash.

Incidentally, I was very moved when at the College of the Transfiguration to see the college principal wear his stole as a cross, in effect as two sashes across his chest. That image and the black Christ will never leave me.

Paul: as you join the three-fold order of bishops, priests and deacons, you will be following in the footsteps of our Bishop, Nick, who was ordained deacon thirty-three years ago. As we both know, he has never lost sight of the fact that even a bishop remains a deacon at heart, one who serves. Equally, he has never lost the knack of being able to communicate the gospel in fresh, compelling ways.

This is his latest message to the clergy of our Diocese, a message really for everyone.

“Some years ago I tried to sum up in the length of a tweet the difference the Christian faith makes. From about a dozen formulations, the one that stuck in my mind is simply this: “Christians are drawn by hope, not driven by fear.” Not surprisingly, I have come back to this during the current pandemic and the demands it has made on all of us.

“The point is this: what we experience now is neither ultimate nor the last word; time will move on and stuff will happen; however, Christian faith is rooted not in formulae for our wellbeing or convenience, but, rather, in the person of the God who raised Christ from the dead. In other words, our trust is in God, not in events.

“This, after all, is the whole point of the Christian gospel. In creation God brings order out of chaos, calling those made in his image to run the risks of doing the same. The subsequent mess is not surprising. Yet, Christmas is about God opting in to the chaos of the world and not exempting himself from what being mortal, material, contingent beings involves. At Easter we see the consequence of this commitment to the world; yet, “God surprises earth with heaven” as the contingency of the world is demonstrated to be limited in power: death is overcome after being endured. The Ascension sees the risen Christ asking his friends to get out of the audience and onto

the stage – to take responsibility for living in the world now in the light of what has been done in Jesus and what is to come in resurrection in the future. At Pentecost his friends are empowered to get on with it, whatever the cost.

“So, there you go: Christian theology in a nutshell. And it is vital that we communicate this as simply and directly as we can. This is the big canvas picture which we easily forget – and which we need to keep finding ways of telling it afresh. For this is a message of hope and joy, rooted in realism and the spectrum of human experience – one that must grasp the hearts and minds of Christians before we and they can convincingly live and tell it abroad.”

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‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’

Amen.