

# Easter V Evensong 2019

*Optimism v. pessimism, balancing life informed through faith.*

***The boy stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled. Twit.***

Spike Milligan's comment on the poem Casabianca.

What extraordinary times we are living through in the United Kingdom (if I can still use that description of our nation!). And what fun lies ahead? What will happen on Thursday when people cast their EU votes? Will the extraordinary rise of the Brexit Party truly bring to fruition the breakdown and breakup of our current essentially two-party system? What machinations take place in darkened rooms for weeks to come over the future of the Prime minister? What of Labour? Where will the dark arts of Seamus Milne lead next? Is the system broken completely – does the monarchy represent the only sign of stability in an increasingly fragmented – indeed, ruptured political landscape?

I almost hear those words at the end of a favourite childhood television programme; *Watch next time for Herge's adventures of Tin Tin!*

That all sounded rather facetious– and none of this is not meant to be political point scoring in any shape, way or form. However, we certainly live in interesting times. For you and I, some choice will have to be made next Thursday about where and how we use the pencil in the booth, and I **do** think that as Christians it is important that we should exercise our civil duty, regardless of how fed-up we are by the whole process. As John F Kennedy said (quoting Burke) 'the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.' Again, I make no political push for anyone, but we should exercise our rights won at such cost.

We will in time be faced with the actual policies of our various parties, and for each of us, this will need to be framed by our own particular circumstances and our approach to the world – there are certainly questions to be answered on all sorts of issues, both national and local.

Both of the lessons this evening have something to help us at this time. You may remember my commenting on the Book of Daniel before – it's a curious mixture of prophecy, apocalypse and biography. Nearer in time to the Gospels than any other Old Testament text, today we heard the vivid account of Daniel in the Lion's Den. I'm sure I had a Ladybird book of this particular story! This is about the misuse of political power. The prefects, satraps and advisors are all busy 'spinning' to bring the downfall of someone who is greatly respected, not least by the ruler himself. But such is the heavy responsibility of keeping the Law of the Medes and Persians intact, that Darius himself is obliged to bring Daniel to book because he himself must rigidly adhere to something he has promulgated.

Bigotry is at the heart of the officials' hectoring the king and it is in order to bring about the downfall of Daniel. I think that we can see here some parallels between this account and modern western secularism with its hatred of the religious of any shade or creed. Ultimately the story is about Faith overcoming the bigotries of this world. This is made

clear further in the account when not only does Darius had all of those who accused Daniel themselves being thrown to the lions, together with their children and wives, so that 'before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones, but, more importantly, Darius declares that Daniel's God is the living God, enduring for ever.

At first glance, the pairing of Daniel with the Resurrection account from Mark seems a curious choice. There has been speculation that this curious ending of the women running away frightened and not saying a word may be because the last part of the original manuscript was torn off or something else happened. What we do know if the other two endings have been appended at a later stage, (albeit early in the history of the Gospel) in order to tidy things up.

We are again at a cave like Daniel's den, but we see here no pride of lions – it is empty. And this of more importance in faith terms than finding Daniel safe after a night with a pride of hungry lions, because our Easter Faith is represented on a grave flooded with the light of Easter freedom. Darius hurries to what might have become a sealed tomb – and he himself has done the sealing. The importance of Easter glory is the transformation the disciples experience in their new life found in the risen Lord.

Hope trounces pessimism and fear, ultimately, is transformed by God's boundless love into the Christian participation of the Divine Life of God itself. It is a call to view the world, with all of its situations and strange twists and turns through the eyes of Faith.

You will, I hope, forgive me for starting this sermon in a rather light-hearted way regarding our current political impasse. In fact, as I said, I do strongly believe that we should seek total engagement within society, but always, seeking the guidance of the Life-giving Spirit at work within our lives.

We are called to look at and engage with the world in a different way, as Fulbert of Chartres does in his great Easter hymn:

Ye choirs of new Jerusalem,  
Your sweetest notes employ,  
The Paschal victory to hymn  
In strains of holy joy.

From hell's devouring jaws the prey  
Alone our Leader bore;  
His ransomed hosts pursue their way  
Where Jesus goes before.

For Judah's Lion bursts His chains,  
Crushing the serpent's head;  
And cries aloud through death's domains  
To wake the imprisoned dead.

Triumphant in His glory now  
To Him all power is given;  
To Him in one communion bow  
All saints in earth and heaven.

Fulbert's great words (translated by Robert Campbell) give us some flavour of the world which has **and continues** to be transformed through the resurrection of Jesus Christ – Judah's Lion – a call to us to participate in, and share with all we come into contact with, the wonderful and **true** freedom of Resurrection Life.

A prayer for our current political situation:

**Heavenly Father, we pray for your blessing and guidance on those who must please many if they are to succeed, yet must love truth if they are to deserve our trust. Shield our politicians from corruption by power, or narrow factionalism, and shield us all from cynicism and apathy. Give us courage to seek to build up your kingdom of justice, mercy, peace and love in our time; which we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen**



Daniel in the lions' den – Peter Paul Rubens 1615 - National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

### **Daniel 6:6-23**

6 So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live for ever! 7 All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. 8 Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' 9 Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

10 Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. 11 The conspirators came and found Daniel

praying and seeking mercy before his God. 12 Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, 'O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?' The king answered, 'The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.' 13 Then they responded to the king, 'Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.'

14 When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. 15 Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, 'Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.'

16 Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!' 17 A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. 18 Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

19 Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. 20 When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, 'O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?' 21 Daniel then said to the king, 'O king, live for ever! 22 My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.' 23 Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

#### **Mark 15: 43- 16: 8**

46 Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.