

# Mike's message .....

## *Vain the stone, the watch, the seal!*

Easter is the major celebration of the Christian year. It encompasses and celebrates the heart of our Gospel - as the love of God, revealed in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, is shown to be greater than all that seeks to imprison us, even death itself.



This year's cycle of readings suggests Matthew's account of the first Easter Day. You'll find it in your Bible as Matthew Chapter 28 verses 1-10. It's broadly similar to Mark, Luke and John - a few differences but the same event. But Matthew has more to tell, and we often miss it. Look at what precedes the Resurrection account, Chapter 27 verses 62-66 and what follows it, Chapter 28 verses 11-15. It's material that is unique to Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew depicts the Roman authorities remembering that Jesus said "*after three days I will rise again*". Thinking that the disciples might try to steal Jesus' body, the Romans place a guard at the tomb, seal the stone and keep watch. When the tomb is later found to be empty the authorities seek to explain it by telling the soldiers to say "*his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep*". Is this the earliest example of what's become known as a conspiracy theory?

Of course the authorities explanation soon unravels. Matthew doesn't go into details about resurrection appearances of Jesus. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene "and the other Mary" (28 .9,10) somewhere near the empty tomb. Then the disciples travel miles and miles back to Galilee "to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (28.16) where they see him, according to Matthew for the first time, after he is risen from the dead. Jesus sends them out to share both the Good News of his Resurrection and "everything I have commanded you" (28 .20)

The conspiracy of the authorities to hide the reality of the resurrection was always doomed to failure. Because the story of the Christian church is of lives transformed because Christ is Risen. The love of God, stronger even than death itself, can transform lives that are imprisoned by guilt from the past or something weighing us down in the present. It can free us from prejudices that trap us behind walls of suspicion and fear or impede our ability to love others. All this can be removed when we realise that God loves us with a love that makes "vain the stone, the watch, the seal" (Charles Wesley) for:

*Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate,  
light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death;  
victory is ours through Him who loves us. (Desmond Tutu)*

# Mike's message .....

## **Kings, football, and an old spoon.**

For the first time in just a month short of seventy years we're about to witness the coronation of a British monarch.

The world is a very different place from 2nd June 1953 when Queen Elizabeth II was crowned and there will be changes to the Coronation Service making it much shorter.

There's also been a change to one of the vows as there is, thankfully, no longer an Empire. But some of the treasures that were, shall we say, 'acquired' during the Empire, such as the Koh-i-Noor diamond, will be on display. Possibly for the last time as the arguments for their return are strong.

Other elements will remain the same though. King Charles III will be anointed in a tradition that goes back to Old Testament times and one of the most famous pieces of Coronation music refers to this. Handel's Zadok the Priest, written for George II's Coronation in 1727, refers to the eponymous cleric anointing Solomon as king of Israel (1 Kings 1 .39-45). Football fans will recognise the tune as contemporary composer Tony Britten only very slightly changed it when he composed the anthem for the UEFA Champions League.

When King Charles is anointed, as a symbol of God's blessing, the oldest of the Crown Jewels, The Coronation Spoon, will be used. When it was first recorded in 1349 it was already described as of 'antique forme' and probably dates from the 11th century.

Coronations are recorded several times in the Bible. But that doesn't mean that the Bible is pro-monarchy. It contains both pro and anti stances in, for example, the account of the institution of the monarchy in the First Book of Samuel, chapters 1 - 12. For an anti-monarchy stance see 1 Sam 7.v3 - 8.v22 and 10.vv17-27, and chapter 12 where the monarchy is seen as a rejection of God's rule (1 Sam 8.7) and its excesses are listed (1 Sam 8.10-19). Excesses of monarchical power frequently earned rebuke by the prophets, beginning with Nathan clashing with King David and continuing until the monarchy was dissolved when the nations of Israel and Judah fell. There is a strong pro-monarchy theme though too. See 1 Sam 9.1 - 10.16, and chapter 11, which talks of Israel's first king, Saul, possessed by "the spirit of God".

The idea of kingship lies behind the whole message of the New Testament. The word 'Messiah' comes from 'anointed one' in Hebrew, and 'Christ' means the same in Greek. But Jesus models a very different model of kingship, and runs away from popular attempts to make him king (Matthew 4 .8-10). The teaching of Jesus proclaims God as King, and in the Kingdom of God worldly values and expectations are turned upside down.



# Mike's message .....

## Let us build a house ...

The hymn 'Let us build a house' is an unofficial 'anthem' of The Cotteridge Church. Written by Marty Haugen, the first verse goes:

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:  
*All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.*



It's a great hymn for The Cotteridge Church where three (at least!) different Christian traditions came together, seeking to end locally the divisions between denominations.

One of the wonderful things about The Cotteridge Church is that there are activities and groups taking place every day. Over the years 'all are welcome' has taken on deeper meaning. From training groups for young adults (C2U) to addiction services (CGL), uniformed organisations (BB and Girlguiding) to pre-school groups (Saplings, Little Foxcubs etc), Cotteridge Church Day Centre for Older Adults to Central England Co-op Gardening Club, there's something for most people, and all are indeed welcome. All this takes place with The Cotteridge Church Café at its heart - a welcoming place run by caring people.

A 'house' as varied and busy as The Cotteridge Church has many joys and frustrations. Some of the groups and activities are church groups - in that the Church Council are ultimately responsible for them and some of their admin - including finances and safeguarding. Other groups pay rent but, as well as a vital source of income, they are a vital and valued part of our life for what they do. Together we serve the local community. Sometimes the boundaries of 'church or room hirer' have become blurred in a good way. For example C2U help run the café once a week.

Like any other house that is full of both guests and family, we are all living alongside each other. That means that, as individuals or as groups, we might need to adapt to situations, sometimes giving, sometimes taking. We also need to be aware that the sensitivities of some people mean that we have to be careful what we say and how we say it. That's about us, the living stones, providing the 'vault of grace' mentioned in the hymn, showing God's love, acceptance, patience. In doing this we will build a house together where, not only all are welcome, but all feel affirmed and valued.

# Mike's message .....

## Let there be Peace on Earth

I'm writing this in mid-October, far too early to be thinking of Christmas, we're only just passed the "25% of the year to go" mark. Yet one of the 'byelines' of Christmas is very apt for current circumstances. God sent a messengers to shepherds on the hills of Palestine with the greeting of 'Peace on Earth'.



That message appears on 'sugar sweet' Christmas cards with robins and smiling faces of children. But that's not how I'm seeing it at the moment. I hear God's bidding of 'Peace on Earth' but all I'm seeing are images of mutilated bodies and the tears of the grieving and displaced as aggressors in both Israel and Palestine wage death and destruction. Let us also remember that the same is going on between Ukraine and Russia, and elsewhere too. But it's mostly the innocent who are killed and injured, or rendered homeless as they flee missiles and invading aggressors.

Let's be clear. The aggressors are far outnumbered by the vast majority people, Israeli and Palestinian, who want peace. But aggressors have the upper hand, the power, and the weapons. Rockets fire back and forth between Gaza and Israel, and violence also hits the West Bank, Palestinian territory occupied by Israel. Northern Israel is also currently under attack from terrorists in Lebanon.

How did we get into this mess? The region is the home of three great religions; Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The Palestinian people themselves are diverse: 93% Muslim, 6% Christian, 1% other including Druze and Samaritans. All faiths proclaim Salaam, Shalom, Peace. Incidentally Palestinian Christians use Salaam, and proclaim Allahu Akbar (God is Great) and Inshallah (If God wills it), after all Arabic is their language.

The history, and current demographics, of the region are complex. But we are not completely helpless. We can prayer for peace, we can question what we hear and see in the media, and we can help practically through Christian Aid and other aid agencies who can ensure our gifts of compassion can reach those in need.

Pray for Israel/Palestine, and conflicts elsewhere, and remember the message proclaimed on the Palestinian hillside. That there may be Peace on Earth.