

1Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 21 April 2013 - Easter 3 (Year C)
Acts 9.36-43; Rev.7.9-17; John 10.22-30

I woke last Sunday morning in a hotel bedroom in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Crews were rowing along the river below me in the early sunshine. I'd decided to go to morning service in Old South Church, in the centre of Boston. I always feel a bit apprehensive about transport systems in strange cities, but I'd checked the city map and the subway lines, so after breakfast I walked up to the nearest station of the Boston T, as it's called. I bought a ticket, managed a change of trains and lines and surfaced in Copley Square, right by the church. But roads were closed, tents filled the square, and a great deal of noise was coming from people in stands along Boylston Street, and I didn't know why. It was only when someone outside the church handed me a flyer that all became clear: the 117th Boston Marathon was to be run the next day, and other races were taking place in advance of the main event. Nice, I thought, that the church helped me to understand what was going on in the world. There were banners draped outside Old South Church, proclaiming it to be 'The Church of the Finishing Line', and the 11 o'clock service was to include the dedication of athletes. I was early, so I walked around the block and about twenty minutes before the service began found a seat in a pew in a church which was filling up fast.

Old South Church was gathered, as it so aptly puts it, in 1669, but the present building is mid-Victorian, and boy does it show it. No surface is left undecorated, a far cry from our own simple sanctuary. It's a congregation of the United Church of Christ, perhaps our closest sister church in the USA. By the time the service began it was full, with some 600-700 people. It was not unlike ours, except that a choir of some two dozen people, in surplices, took a prominent part in leading the worship. At a certain point the athletes and their supporters were asked to stand, while the rest of us raised our arms in blessing over them. The sermon, on Jesus's encounter with the Canaanite woman and his very rude response to her when she asked him to heal her child, was shorter than I'd expected, but direct and thought-provoking. The preacher

pointed out how much time Jesus spent out of doors and how little inside, and she drew out her theme by stressing that on this occasion Jesus was where he was not supposed to be, where he didn't belong. You can listen to the podcast. After the service, over coffee, I got talking to the curator of rare books from Boston University, who had recently joined the church, and to a young mother who worked for the US equivalent of Traidcraft and who was about to make her first visit to the UK, to its headquarters in the north-east. It's always good to have such experiences of the wider life of the church, because it gives us a fresh perspective and lifts us out of our own narrow view. The very next day, as you know, two bombs went off among the crowd watching the marathon, killing three people and causing serious injuries, including loss of limbs, to over 170 others. And both bombs had gone off along the street, exactly where I had taken a walk the day before because I was early for the service.

What did it mean that we blessed the athletes during worship? Why did God allow the blessing of Sunday to be turned to carnage the following day? What kind of grim joke was that? I don't have answers to such questions, though I wouldn't be human if I didn't ask them. But there are two things I do know. The first is that the evil in human hearts is real and sometimes it exacts a terrible price. Though its followers have too often turned away from the message of the Cross and have sought to impose their will by violence, the Christian way is always seek to conquer evil by goodness, hatred by love. It calls out to those who nurture hatred in their hearts and plot to maim and to destroy that there is another, better way and invites them to be born again, to discard their old self and be remade into the self of Christ. We must never forget that. The second thing is this. We can ask as many questions as we like, protest as we will to God or conclude that God is absent or dead. But our questions and protests will never help those who are overtaken by suffering and loss. It is our deeds which count. I do not know in what ways the tragedy which struck Boston just by the church where I had worshipped the day before may yet be shot through with signs of resurrection; but if it is, those signs will be found in the care and the love offered by doctors and nurses, support services, friends and strangers alike. That, surely, takes priority over

demanding explanations which may never come.

At the same time as the Boston Marathon was attacked, bombs were raining down in Iraq and Syria, as they do every day, and killing dozens of people. A pregnant woman in Lowestoft committed suicide, having killed her three other children. We may not fathom what twisted logic is used to justify such outrages or the depths of misery to which a young woman may sink. But the power of death and destruction is all around us. We can let it engulf us. Or we can listen in it for the voice of Deuteronomy - choose life - and the dying words of the Saviour - Father, forgive, for they know not what they do - and become witnesses to the power of the new beginning and the love which comes again, 'like wheat that springeth green'.

The reason I was in Boston at all was that I had been invited to speak at a conference on the Song of Songs. There were some twelve of us, Jewish scholars and Christians from various traditions, united by the fact that we had all published work on this text. It was a richly stimulating encounter. My topic was the way the Song of Songs had been handled by two poets separated by religious confession and more than a century, the Spanish Carmelite mystic St John of the Cross, writing in the 1570s and 80s, and our own Isaac Watts, father of the English hymn, writing in the first part of the eighteenth century. There was no historical link between them, yet they shared many of the same understandings of the biblical poem; but I will spare you any further details. One of the speakers, a Jewish scholar, talked about the four different ways in which Scripture had traditionally been read, as much by Jews as Christians. You would start with the plain sense, reading it, as it were, from the outside, to understand what the words meant. You would also read it in community, as a book which had been treasured and interpreted for hundreds of years, to discover what your ancestors had thought, and to set that alongside the concerns of your own times. As you did so, you began to look at the text from the inside. You would likewise read it to find out what it showed you about how you might grow in virtue and faith. And finally, you would read it looking for signs and clues about the deepest of all mysteries, the nature

and being of God.

So it occurred to me that today's story from the Acts could benefit from this approach, though I'll keep to the first two, the plain sense and reading in community. At first sight it seems straightforward enough. A woman dies and is raised to life. Modern readers find that hard to swallow. It just doesn't happen. So we rationalise it. People didn't have the benefit of modern medicine. The woman was in some kind of coma which was mistaken for death and she woke out of it when she heard Peter's words. The Acts of the Apostles are full of miracles which happened in the first Christian communities; it is a kind of spiritual romance or novel rather than a factual account, intended, no doubt, as a form of propaganda for the new faith. Yet there is history at its core - the growth of the earliest Christian churches around the Mediterranean, the conversion of Saul - and there are arguments and disputes. It's not all roses. Since in this case we can't know precisely what happened or even if it happened at all, it could be just as it says or it could be something else. Pay your money and take your choice.

Only when we read it in community does some kind of deeper sense begin to emerge. The traditional explanation is that in its earliest days the faith was confirmed by miracles, which ceased once the church had grown and become established. That's not to say that miracles don't happen, but they are not the lifeblood of belief. After all, a few years back the lives of two members of this congregation hung in the balance both, thankfully, recovered. We might also remember that since the start of the last century the growth of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement has seen a revival of emphasis on supernatural gifts in the church. Why might that be? Is it a return to the irrational, in the face of intellectual challenges which people don't want to face directly? Or is it the movement of the Spirit in the churches?

But a more important aspect of this reading is to listen to it in community with other passages of Scripture. And at once we find a clear set of parallels between the raising of Dorcas whose name means Gazelle and the raising of Jairus's daughter at the end of Mark 5. In both cases people come with the news; at both houses there is a crowd of

mourners, and in both everyone is sent away. In Mark Jesus enters the child's room with Peter, James and John to call her back to life; in Acts, it is Peter alone who does so. Mark records the Aramaic words Jesus uses, 'Talitha cum'; the Hebrew name of Dorcas is Tabitha, just one letter different. You simply can't read this passage without having in mind the Gospel miracle and the lesson is, I think, clear. The early Church is continuing the ministry of Jesus. It chooses life over death. It is where people come to life again, discover what they had been missing, find a purpose and a calling. But we also need to look for the differences. We know nothing about the little girl in Mark 5, but Dorcas, we are told, is 'devoted to good works and acts of charity'. That, too, is a kind of resurrection - exactly the kind which will show the victims of human cruelty in Boston or anywhere that the light still shines in the darkness.

The lectionary gives us a final clue. In John 10 Jesus is again being asked if he is the Messiah. He reminds his interrogators of the signs he has already given: water turned to wine, a paralyzed man who walks, a great crowd fed with a few loaves and fishes, a blind man who sees. Is that not enough? he asks. And in a way it is not, for there is to be one final sign, in the chapter which follows, the raising of Lazarus; and that sign is the forerunner to the greatest sign of all, enacted on Calvary and among the early morning dews of a garden where the stone which sealed death in has been rolled back to let life out.

The church is to be community of resurrection; any church; this church. Kindness, good works, acts of charity, are givers of life. The risen Lord who stands among us can bring back to life those who are dead to mercy, dead to justice, dead to love. He stands among us marked by the wounds we inflicted upon him, yet with the assurance that physical death cannot extinguish the life we have in God. Never is it more important to choose the life he brings than when the bombs rain down and the evil in human hearts takes its terrible toll. Choose life: the life of the wounded healer, the teacher who opens our unseeing eyes, the one whom no tomb can hold, no evil silence, no heavy stone imprison; the one who comes to us to let life out.