



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

**Readings: *I Peter 1.3-9 and John 20.19-31***

*Low Sunday: a service at Downing Place URC, with representatives of the Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz*

Text: I Peter 1.3

‘he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’.  
‘wiedergeboren hat zu einer lebendigen Hoffnung durch die Auferstehung Jesu Christi von den Toten’.

These can feel like tricky times. Perhaps our personal circumstances are less stable or happy than we desire – maybe we have things going on that mean we sense a grey cloud just over our shoulder, or a persistent heaviness in the pit of the stomach. The state of the world doesn’t help. Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Taiwan, Ukraine, the economy, industrial relations and strikes, febrile politics, climate change, refugees ... grey clouds, heavy stomachs, graue Wolken, schwerer Magen. And even on a weekend that sees the rescheduled jubilee of the URC, marking fifty years since that initial union in 1972 of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, church life can be shrouded with a discernible greyness that things aren’t what they were, or were expected to be, a heaviness about what the future holds.

I recognise that my own peace of mind flourishes when I have a hopeful sense that humanity is making progress - that the general direction of society and culture is of things getting better.<sup>1</sup> Whatismore, human community, at its best, is playing a key role in this progress – even if it can be ever so messy and controversial when enhancing the circumstances of one group mars the circumstances for another. I think of Cambridge’s apparent challenge of making progress for both cyclists and pedestrians at the same time.

But progress there is: human ingenuity means that we can treat, cure and even banish diseases that used to kill us; we are capable of embracing ‘the other’, das andere, whom we used to marginalise; seeing it as the least bad option, nations often strive for democracy instead of tyranny; and Downing Place Church stands as a thoroughly contemporary witness to fruitful faith, hope and love – to seizing a Kairos moment when it’s presented, rather than letting it slip through our fingers. And yet ... and yet, watching the news sometimes makes it seem nothing is any better at all. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose - the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Maybe you have read Val McDermid’s latest novel about journalist Alison Burns.<sup>2</sup> It’s called 1989, the year in which it is set. Narrating Allie’s investigation of a murder, McDermid references things many of us recall from that period, including the poll tax (Kopfsteuer), Perestroika, the reunification of Germany, the impact of the Solidarity movement on Poland, the pre-Christmas airplane bombing over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, AIDS /HIV - - - and all that against the backdrop of Allie Burns’s deeply committed love for Rona, her girlfriend, which comes at the expense of any relationship with her ‘disgusted’ father.<sup>3</sup> My own 1989 was also noteworthy. We spent it in South Africa, where 1989 saw F. W. de Klerk become President, and key ANC members released from jail, ahead of Nelson Mandela’s own freedom early in 1990.

Thirty-four years on, even if some of the ‘issues’ are different, do things generally feel better? Is there progress? Even as we do achieve genuine advancement, sometimes it can seem that progress keeps stalling. It’s as if every generation has to learn for itself about human rights and responsibilities, about the imperatives of respect, dignity, and justice. After all, most children must learn for themselves that excess heat hurts ... and so do cruel words. Two steps forward one step

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<sup>1</sup> cf Tawney, R. H. 1952 *Equality*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd page 266

<sup>2</sup> McDermid, Val 2022 *1989* London: Sphere

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* page 69

back. In short, hope is at a premium. The grey clouds can seem to darken, the heaviness in the stomach to deepen; graue Wolken, schwerer Magen.

Whilst I was on sabbatical, I made the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. For thirty days, largely in silence, I had opportunity to reflect upon the life of Jesus Christ and its impact upon my own. I learned afresh that I am as flawed as I ever have been, but also that I am wondrously made new, not by my personal progress towards holiness, but by the saving power of God's love, the authenticity and victory of which is shown in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Maybe that explains my understanding this Easter, as much as ever before, that we have to celebrate it each year because amidst the grey clouds and heavy stomachs we need to be reminded that hope cannot be rooted in our progress, but in God's victory. Without that empty tomb, in whatever way we want to explain it, the evidence of history that seems to be endlessly recycled appears to be that there is not much hope.

Writing to people in hard circumstances, which include religious persecution, Peter speaks of 'a living hope', 'einer lebendigen Hoffnung', which God offers through the mind-stretching notion of Jesus Christ being raised from the dead. This mysterious image of the one who was dead on Friday but alive on Sunday is full of potential for debate, for ridicule, for Thomas's doubt, but its overarching message for us to celebrate is that 'living hope' is not about the progress that human society gains and then loses, in a ceaseless ebb and flow, but about the reality and power of God's redeeming love, which began at creation and has never been defeated, as it is working out God's good purposes.

The other main activity of the sabbatical was a journey in the footsteps of J. S. Bach, a highlight of which was being in Leipzig on what would have been his 338<sup>th</sup> birthday. His musical career reached its pinnacle as Cantor of St Thomas's Church there, and this year is the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival. The Thomanerchor concert to mark his birthday included the two cantatas that he wrote to audition for the job in February 1723. Candidates had been asked to write something reflecting upon the story of Jesus healing a beggar who was blind. <sup>4</sup> Using an anonymous text, and the limited instrumental resources at his disposal, Bach opens the work with a duet for Soprano and Alto accompanied by strings and two oboes. Representing the beggar, they sing:

'... lass durch deine Wunderhand// Die so viel Böses abgewandt, // Mir gleichfalls Hilf und Trost geschehen.'

'... through thine hand, with wonder filled, // Which so much evil hath repelled, // Give me as well both help and comfort.'<sup>5</sup>

We find this person – living with the grey cloud and heavy stomach of blindness – recognising that their hope is not in something they can conjure by any efforts of their own, least of all by their begging. They look rather to the One who has repelled evil, Böses abgewandt - Jesus, David's Son - to be the source of their help and comfort, of their hope. I wonder whether that image of lost sight is particularly powerful, precisely because it so accurately depicts how the state of the world and of our own vicissitudes can make us feel. No more than impaired vision are they difficulties we can simply wish away, or talk ourselves out of, or turn our backs on. They are facts of life, facing us head-on. Moreover, often they aren't things that we can expect governments gradually to resolve, or charities steadfastly to ease, or the milk of human kindness to heal. As N. T. Wright has it: 'What creation needs is not abandonment on the one hand, nor evolution on the other, but redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world's waiting for.' End quote. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 18.35ff

<sup>5</sup> Bach, J. S. BWV 23 'Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn', 'Thou, very God and David's Son' – first movement, text anonymous

<sup>6</sup> Wright, Tom 2007 *Surprised by Hope* London: SPCK page 119

And The Church, what are we to be as those to whom Easter offers this 'living hope', this 'lebendigen Hoffnung', which arrests, inspires, and sustains us? Well, does it not become a living hope whenever we yield to its power and persuasion, and let it reshape who we are? Lesslie Newbigin, who ninety years ago sat, Sunday by Sunday, in this sanctuary, suggests that The Church is to be 'a sign, pointing beyond itself to God's love and holiness'.<sup>7</sup> You see, ours is not to seek proof by putting our hands into the risen Christ's side; how could we. Rather, we set our hands to the plough, in unrelenting ministry and mission. It's not in order to achieve progress, but rather that we might be the proof of Jesus' resurrection by making real that undefeated and indefatigable love. As Bishop Lesslie also said, 'If [we] accept Jesus' call to follow, and accept the witness of Easter morning ... that vision affects our conduct from this moment on.'<sup>8</sup>

Renewed this Easter for such a living hope, may the One who stood among the disciples in Jerusalem stand among us, whatever the grey clouds, murmuring, 'Peace be with you,' 'Ich bringe euch Frieden!'<sup>9</sup> Amen

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16<sup>th</sup> April 2023

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<sup>7</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie 1990 in *Reform* magazine, June 1990 page 6

<sup>8</sup> Wainwright, Geoffrey 2000 *Lesslie Newbigin: a theological life* Oxford: OUP page 328f

<sup>9</sup> John 20.19