



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 8 March by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Is the Lord among us or not?

For a while, my life was surrounded by pirates.

Now that might sound a little more dramatic than it actually is. I don't mean it in a literal sense, that I lived on a ship and was surrounded by pirates. I don't mean it in a figurative sense, that I feel surrounded by dodgy people. My colleagues are much nicer than that. Instead, I mean that growing up, I think I thought about pirates more than might be usual.

For a start, I was born in Bristol. Therefore, in school, at every available opportunity, someone would bring up Edward Teach. And, oops, there I've done it myself. If you already recognise the name Edward Teach, then well done; but if not, then don't worry. At my school, there was a pre-assumed level of pirate knowledge, meaning people would expect you to instantly recognise this name. However, you might better recognise this Bristol-born pirate of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by his nickname... Blackbeard.

A vivid and exciting picture was painted of Blackbeard with the ends of his beard set aflame, his ship the Queen Anne's Revenge, and his flag (not of a skull and crossbones) but of a skeleton holding an hourglass, violently stabbing at a bleeding heart. Less of a focus was, however, put on his criminality and violence. Of all the amazing and inspiring people born in Bristol, not counting myself, the one we seemed to learn most about was Blackbeard the Pirate.

Yet it wasn't just growing up in Bristol that exposed me to the world of piracy. The television was full of them too. I was about the right age to watch all of the Pirates of the Caribbean films as they were released. I also read and watched enough Horrible Histories to learn more about putrid pirates and their exciting escapades.

As a young adult, I then went off to read politics at university. And then to my surprise, in my paper on global security, I even found myself writing an exam essay on the effects of modern piracy. For a while, I was surrounded by pirates.

So, you might rightly ask: why have the Exodus of the Israelites and the Samaritan woman at the well made me think about pirates once again?

If we imagine a typical, and fictional, pirate, we might picture someone with a pegleg, a parrot on their shoulder, a tricorne hat, and an eyepatch. Now, if you've read anything about pirates, you know that they did not wear an eyepatch because they had lost one of their eyes. Instead, it was a very simple but clever way to move around the ship. On the deck, it might be bright and sunny, but down below there could be only a modest flicker of candlelight. Therefore, when rushing from the light to the dark, the pirate would switch the eyepatch quickly to the other eye. And lo and behold, they'd not be blinded but would be able to see clearly using the eye that was already attuned to the darkness.

The privateers knew that it is hard for the human eye to adapt to sudden darkness. Just as it is painful to adapt to sudden brightness. Yet they realised that with a slight change of perspective and some acclimatization, they could see those glimpses of light where others would see only pitch darkness.

Our readings from the Holy Scriptures this morning, encourage us to adapt our eyes in darkness. To adapt our perspective so that we can discern God's presence in the darkness by recognising the glimpses of love.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, when we feel surrounded by despair, when it appears as if there is little hope left in the world, we can recognise the true reality of sin and suffering. But we can also transform our perspective of our world. And we do this by trusting that God's love exists; by believing that love is always stronger than hatred; and, therefore, by searching for those small glimpses of love that shine even through the darkness.

In our reading from the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Exodus, we hear of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness as they become restless and frustrated. They have been freed from captivity in Egypt, and yet these travelling migrants are not free from suffering. In the wilderness, they lacked water and became thirsty. They began to wonder if life as slaves in Egypt was better than their current situation. In their strife, they even turned upon their liberator, Moses. As we read, they complained to him, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'. Their grumbling continued, and they asked an extremely piercing and relevant question... 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

It is a question in our modern world that we too might feel tempted to ask. Is the Lord among us or not?

Often, commentators present the Israelites in the wilderness as if they are particularly stubborn, ungrateful, and faithless. Yet this surely cannot be fair. As we read earlier in Exodus 3, they lacked food. They now lack water. If any of us went to the Sinai Peninsula and walked through the wilderness without food or water, I don't think it would take very long for us to complain and return to our positions of comfort.

Reading the whole story, we know that God, through His unending love and compassion, provided manna to eat and enabled Moses to strike a rock and bring forth water. Echoing this in our Gospel reading, we hear Our Lord Jesus Christ promise a spiritual water that will always satisfy us and He says that He has food to eat that His disciples do not know about. Even in the wilderness, God's love is made manifest. And yet, as we see with the Israelites, in the midst of suffering, it can be difficult to always see God's love surrounding us. Is the Lord among us or not?

In this season of Lent, as we travel through our own reflective wilderness, preparing to celebrate the great victory of Christ at Easter, we have the opportunity to train ourselves to spot the glimpses of love that we trust can always be found. Even in the darkness. As an Easter people, we as Christians in all seasons must hold onto the hope of God's love. This doesn't mean pretending that evil does not exist, it doesn't mean turning a blind eye to injustice, it doesn't mean ignoring suffering. Instead, we are called to transform the world by looking for the signs of love and sharing them with others. Knowing that true love is stronger than hatred.

In our world, we daily hear about the suffering caused by human arrogance, pride, and greed. Right now, as we learn of violence and conflict across the Middle East, it can be so easy for us, like the ancient Israelites, to be overwhelmed by despair. As empathetic humans, we cannot deny or diminish the warmongering, the prejudice, the dehumanisation, and the bloodshed. Yet as Christians, we cannot let the perspective of hatred win.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes He is. Yes He is, even in the darkness. The love of God is in every ambulance siren. The love of God is with every peacemaker. The love of God is in every hand held for comfort, in every tear that is shed, in every word of kindness that is uttered. The leaders of the nations can bomb our world, they can force us into the wilderness, they can try to take away our hope, but they can never take from us the glimpses of God's love. We therefore must adapt our eyes to cherish the moments of love that shine even through the darkness.

Like the ancient Israelites, we are in the wilderness. Regions of our world are plagued by war. Our natural environment is threatened by the climate

emergency. On this International Women's Day, we can still see the misogyny of our very society that goes unchallenged. People across our world are oppressed and silenced for their God-given sexuality, for their gender identity, for simply being who they truly are.

If we are not careful, the anxiety of the world can overwhelm us. Yet the Incarnation of Christ, His passion for justice, His concern for the poor, His sacramental hospitality offered at this very table, and His loving sacrifice made for all, point us towards the unending, undefeatable, and immeasurable love of our God.

Do not let the darkness of hatred and division overcome us. Recognise the stubborn determination of true love. Believe in the hope of a better world and make it happen. Find that seed of love within you and let it be victorious. Share God's love through your compassion, your kindness, your empathy, your charity.

Even the pirates knew that it is hard for the human eye to adapt to darkness; therefore, this Lent, train yourselves to celebrate every sign of love. For God is love and those who live in God live in love, and God lives in them.

Amen.

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