



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 22 March by the Reverend Sally Wright, Priest Vicar.

Passion Sunday

‘Unbind him and let him go.’

May I speak in the name of our living God. Amen.

If. It’s such a tiny word, but it’s so very powerful, isn’t it? I can’t help but think that one of the important lessons of ministry is just how powerful it is, because when I think of all the stories I’ve listened to, there have been so many ifs. Some of them have been good ifs, but so many have been painful and tinged with deep regret.

If I’d got that job, life would be different. If only I’d made more out of my life. If she’d set off a minute earlier, she might still be here. If only I hadn’t argued with my dad. And there are the ifs concerning God too: if God is all powerful and all loving, why does God allow suffering? So many ifs.

Today, on Passion Sunday, we hear another heart-rending if: ‘if you had been there, my brother would not have died.’

In early 2020, I spent a weekend at a family constellations workshop in Devon. It was absolutely fascinating and I’ve been interested in the work ever since. It is a modality created by priest, missionary and therapist, Bert Hellinger, in the 1980s. At its core is the uncovering and healing of hidden dynamics within a family or other system, which always impact the whole.

So, for example, a member of a family might unknowingly carry a burden on behalf of the whole family, or future generations might end up repeating, or compensating for, a pattern begun in a previous generation. And it is not just families where we can observe these hidden dynamics: they are at play within every system.

Workshops are designed to help shift this energy, to bring resolution through a physical exploration of the dynamic, with those present standing in place of family members, conduits for the universal energies of giving and taking, belonging and hierarchy, for instance, which are always present in life and which inform the constellation. What clients find is that the shifts experienced in the room tend

to be mirrored in their actual family, without other family members even being aware of what has happened.

I recently heard a facilitator talk about some of the principles of Family Constellations. She described one of these principles as saying YES to what our life has been and what it presents to us in this present moment. To be clear, this is not to say that we celebrate challenge or trauma. No. We might well want to say, 'I don't understand what or why this happened, this situation was so painful, this person was so challenging, I cannot bear it, I resent it. But, we say, 'yes,' in the sense of accepting that it happened.

Why? Because, without this, 'yes,' we are bound to our pain, forever in the place of victim or perpetrator, unable to move. We get stuck. It is only in our, 'yes,' that we allow movement or healing, that we allow the possibility of creativity. To put it into church language, it is in our 'yes,' that we open ourselves to the possibility of resurrection.

I offer you an example. Last month, I visited Chichester with my parents. I was a curate there over 20 years ago now, when the diocese was not even remotely supportive of women's ministry. I went to spend time with my parents and enjoy a trip down Memory Lane, but being there made me think back to that time of my life.

A whole procession of men in authority over me who had acted with injustice, unkindness and arrogance at that time came to my mind, from bishops accusing me of things I hadn't done or accusing me of *not* doing things I had done, to a bullying colleague and various others.

It felt strange being taken back to these deeply uncomfortable feelings, but as I walked around Bosham Harbour early one morning, I realised that I had gone there to forgive. At one level I had moved forwards, but I wasn't actually in a place of acceptance or 'yes.' In fact, I was still the victim, with a very strong no, and in so being, I was unwittingly handing over my power to that procession of men, blocking myself from receiving something new, from receiving the creative power of resurrection.

Passiontide *begins* and *ends* with resurrection, with the lifting up of Lazarus to a new earthly life at the beginning and with the lifting up of all humanity to resurrection life at Easter, not just in the hereafter, but *here and now*. But I put to you that resurrection requires our yes.

As we enter Passiontide, a time when we ponder the suffering, or Passion of Christ, we would do well to remember that the point of Passiontide is not to

get stuck in it. It is to move through it with Mary Magdalene to the new Eden on Easter Day. As Prof Sarah Mortimer, of the University of Oxford, puts it:

“...the point of Passiontide is not *only*, not even *primarily*, to remember Christ’s suffering, but to recognise the depth of divine love that *transforms us and the whole world.*”

Jesus says to Lazarus’ family and friends, ‘Unbind him and let him go.’ And so, I’m curious: what in you might be waiting for that depth of transforming love? Is there something within you that has you bound, either as victim or as perpetrator? Is there something you are yet to say ‘yes’ to, perhaps because it is painful or because you don’t understand it? Is there something in your life that you are yet to accept?

If so, perhaps there is an invitation to journey with Jesus once again over the next two weeks of Passiontide, knowing that we walk with the one who is the *epitome* of ‘yes.’ Because from this point onwards, we watch as Jesus says the most extraordinary and profound ‘yes,’ to all that unfolds, including death. But from that supreme ‘yes,’ comes a power so mighty that it is able to bring life even out of death.

If you had been there, my brother would not have died. If only. If. Here we are at that tiny word again. But this time, may we hear Jesus say:

‘Unbind him and let him go.’

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as we follow Jesus, walking alongside him in his Passion, may we also journey towards our own ‘yes,’ not in the sense of celebrating sadness or pain, but in the acceptance of what our life has been, with the pain and regret, as well as the joy and laughter.

Because when we hold our pain and regret tightly, we are unable to receive anything new. It is only with hands and hearts open in surrender that we are able to receive something beautiful and new through the endless resurrection creativity of God, that we are able to rise to new life with Ezekiel’s dry bones.

It is true: the word ‘if’ holds power to consume us and leave us broken, but it also holds the power of resurrection, the power to set us free, because if we are able to accept the life we have lived, if we are able to find our way to ‘yes,’ then who knows what the loving creativity of God, so perfectly expressed in the resurrection of Jesus, might work within us?

‘Unbind him and let him go.’

I end with the poem, 'Roads,' by Ruth Bidgood:

*No need to wonder what heron-haunted lake
lay in the other valley,
or regret the songs in the forest
I chose not to traverse.
No need to ask where other roads might have led,
since they led elsewhere;
for nowhere but this here and now
is my true destination.
The river is gentle in the soft evening,
and all the steps of my life have brought me home.*

Amen.

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Priest Vicar

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