

Isn't it great when a plan all comes together? Sometimes everything works smoothly – sometimes less so. Sometimes you get to where you were aiming at – but having taken a rather different route, and perhaps sometimes, you don't always achieve what you were aiming for.

I am a big fan of television cooking competitions – whether that is MasterChef the original, the professionals or even celebrity – and of course the Great British Bake Off is compulsory viewing. But that's not to say they are not intensely annoying at times. I long for the day when one of the judging chefs cooks something and Greg Wallace on tasting it responds, crikey that's horrible! Or when the contestants are given 20 minutes to cook a dish which it would clearly take the likes of you and me twice as long to prepare. But actually, despite all that, in the vast majority of cases, at the end of the time they have, a dish has been completed. A plan has come together – if not quite perfectly.

And when we consider the Easter story, the build up to it, those 3 days of waiting from Friday to Sunday, and then what happened afterwards, we see a plan, God's plan, completely coming together. When we consider the story of Jesus' life up until that first Easter morning, so much of what happened had been predicted – whether that was by Old Testament prophets or by Jesus himself – but that didn't make it any easier for those living alongside Jesus, or even for us today as we try to live out the lives that Jesus wants us to live.

We started our service this morning at the tomb – trying to imagine how Mary Magdalene would have been feeling as she approached the tomb to probably simply pay her last homage to the teacher. Perhaps to anoint the body, as she had anointed the feet of the living Jesus. But then she was faced with the empty tomb.

There must have been so much confusion during that week, if it was a week, leading up to that day when Mary stood at the empty tomb. Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem in triumph. yet just days later those same people were calling for him to be killed. And what about those things that Jesus had said – well in the temple he shouted rather than said when he saw the cheating and irreverent behaviour of the stalls holders in the temple? And what about him saying that the temple would be destroyed and re-built in three days – what was all that about?

And then Jesus, the Messiah, was beaten and treated like a common criminal, and put up on a cross, and died. And the next day, the Passover, the synagogue would have been packed, and what did they see – the curtain that was designed to separate the ordinary people from God, had been ripped in two, so the divide between people and God was no longer there.

And then in the garden – that moment. “Mary”. “Rabounni”. “I have seen the Lord.”

The plan has come together.

But the plan didn't stop there. Our reading from Acts is in the middle of a passage which is, for us, one of the most significant passages in the whole bible.

You see up to this point, in the Acts of the Apostles, which is the story of the earliest Christian Church, the fully accepted belief of the followers of Jesus was that Jesus came to this earth just for the benefit of the Jewish people. But here that all changes. It started with Peter meeting a man called Cornelius, who was a Roman centurion, who we are told was a devout man who feared God with all his household, and who prayed constantly to God. But he was not Jewish.

Then Peter had a vision of a large sheet containing all sorts of things that as a Jew he was not allowed to eat and God saying to him – go ahead and eat. And God told Peter this 3 times – kind of significant for

Peter who, as you will probably remember, denied Jesus three times. But he was adamant that as a Jew he would not eat these foods. But if he were a gentile . . . .

At almost the same time a group of men who had been sent to Peter by Cornelius to ask Peter to come and visit him arrived. And on hearing about Cornelius, who he was, and what he was not, the penny dropped with Peter who suddenly realised the good news of Jesus Christ was not just for the Jews, but for everyone. So Peter went to Cornelius and Peter speaks to those present, and our reading was what he said.

And in that reading three verses jumped out at me, and whilst translations differ slightly, I have opted for this version. It is 34-36. 'Peter began to speak: "I really understand now that God does not consider some people to be better than others. He accepts anyone who worships him and does what is right. It is not important what nation they come from. God has spoken to the people of Israel. He sent them the Good News that peace has come through Jesus Christ, the Lord of all people.'

So whilst God initially spoke to the people of Israel, he now speaks to everyone, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever they are like. And what is the message – 'peace has come through Jesus Christ, the Lord of all people.'

How then, do we put that message into practice? There was a man in the story I have not mentioned yet, but to me is a vital person to recognise. Joseph of Arimathea, about who we were told was, "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews" overcame that fear and plucked up the courage to ask Pilate, a much feared man, for the body of Jesus. No longer could Joseph of Arimathea be considered a secret disciple. He had the courage to stand up and say, "Yes I am a follower of Jesus". Let Joseph of Arimathea be an inspiration to us all today.

An inspiration to us all to ensure that Jesus is always at the centre of our lives – not just when we can make time. I was listening to a talk the other day about how we should react to the empty tomb, and the speaker made what, to me, was a really telling point.

In effect what he was saying was that Jesus came to this world to show us how to live our lives, to teach us what we needed to know, and then to sacrifice himself, at no inconsiderable cost to himself, to the one of the hardest death's imaginable – so that our sins are forgiven, and so we can make ourselves ready for that eternal life.

Eternal life. Eternity. How long are our lives on this earth – 30 years, sometimes less, 50, 70, 100 years – but what are those periods of time compared to eternity? Should we not be spending our lives preparing ourselves, making it possible, that we can share eternity with our Lord and Saviour – what can be better?

That's God's plan. When we join him in eternity, that is God's plan come to fruition. God would like each and every person to join him – not just those who know him already and are preparing themselves – but also those who are not yet ready. We are told that Jesus will come again and will take with him those who are prepared. That is the message that it is our responsibility as God's church, to spread – to make God's plan work.

This Easter let's make a new commitment to God's plan.

Amen