

Christ is risen - He is risen indeed

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Easter Sunday

I suspect it's not always easy to believe what I and so many people say in the Easter Season. The idea of someone being put to death, entombed, and then coming back to life goes against our 21st century scientific, logical minds. But then, so does any belief in God, belief that Jesus was the incarnation of that God. But we wouldn't be here today if we didn't have some faith, something inside us somewhere that senses that there must be some truth about it.

One of the things that often convinces people of the truth of the resurrection is the power it has had. Sights and experiences of the resurrected Christ empowered a comparatively small group of men and women - with the help of the Holy Spirit, of course - to spread the message of Jesus as the Christ, God incarnate to thousands and thousands of people, down the centuries and across the world... and this is in spite of the fact that the reports of Jesus' resurrection appearances are actually rather small in number, and very mixed. This is perhaps one reason why people believe they can't have been made up. If you were going to fabricate a story you'd make sure all the 'witnesses', if you like, told the same story.

One thing about Jesus' appearances is that people often didn't recognise him. Whatever his resurrected body was like, it wasn't the same as his earthly body. So he was 'revealed' to people in different ways.

Mary Magdalene recognised him in that single word - 'Mary'. The disciples on the road to Emmaus knew there was something special about Jesus in the way he 'opened the scriptures' to them, but it was in the BREAKING OF THE BREAD that they recognised him. 7 of the disciples recognised Jesus when he gave them the advice to put their nets the other side of the boat - so their potentially disastrous fishing trip was transformed into cause for rejoicing, and they knew him as he shared a meal with them by the lakeside.

It seems that Jesus could pass through walls. We hear that he suddenly appeared to the disciples huddled together terrified after his crucifixion, but he was only revealed to Thomas by showing him his hands and his feet, still bearing the scars. I find this appearance to Thomas one of the most moving - it demonstrated that, whatever Christ's resurrected body was like, it still carried the scars of his suffering and death. Resurrection didn't TAKE AWAY what had gone before.

I suspect many of us have had experiences that were, to some small or large extent, 'resurrections'. We certainly all go through times of difficulty and pain .. perhaps a physical or mental illness, broken relationships, financial difficulties, worry about someone we love, or bereavement....Suffering, in its many forms, is part and parcel of human life. 'Resurrection' comes when we begin to realise that we are coming out the other side of suffering. SOMETIMES it may be that the difficulty is totally resolved - illness is cured, relationships are healed, financial difficulties solved ... but this often won't be the case. We may find out that an illness is long-term, that relationships can't be healed, that there's no solution to financial difficulties so a completely new, less comfortable way of life will be necessary and there is no 'cure' for a bereavement.

But, what many people really HAVE experienced is a sort of 'coming to terms' /learning to live with the situation. And this is a sort of resurrection because we are no longer 'buried' under the weight of the

problem, we find we have resurfaced - at least partly - and at last it seems that life can start being lived again.

It will of course be a NEW life - it cannot be same.

Even if there has been a complete CURE or resolution we still carry with us the experience of our suffering. The wounds may have healed, but the scars are there. And if it has been a 'coming-to-terms-with' then the wounds will still be there - but in the process of healing. So scars and wounds become part of a new way of living. And surely these scars and wounds make us more human.

Suffering is part of human life - as well as joy and contentment, so when we know what it is to suffer we are more mature, more fully human. And one of the results of this is that we are more able to help those who are still going through their 'passion', their 'holy week'. We can never really know what someone else is feeling, but if we have suffered, we know better how to stand alongside them. We may be able to offer words of comfort - or suggestions about how to cope - not theoretical ideas, but out of our own experience. We may be able to give practical help - meals to a family bereaved, or in great distress, and sometimes, showing people our own scars, sharing our own suffering with them, can help.

But, of course, these are the ways in which Jesus revealed himself, and surely continues to be revealed today. We shall never recognise Jesus in our lives today by what he looks like - but we may recognise him in the love that is around us - in words spoken, in actions of kindness, compassion, or in scars (suffering and pain) shared.

One thing that what I've said doesn't really address, and something that is possibly one of the hardest things for us to 'come to terms with', is the terrible cruelty and needless suffering of others in the world today. There is often little we can do about it so, when we have done that, we may still wonder what is going on - WHY? It seems to me that Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that, even out of the mess and noise of persecution, out of the agony and suffering of those persecuted, there will be a resurrection/a new life after the terrible things in our world today. This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of our faith - the hope of a new world of peace and joy - and we need the help of the Holy Spirit to hang on to it.

It may be difficult for us to believe that a man was crucified and rose again, but this particular man was God incarnate, for whom nothing is impossible. And if we open our hearts and minds, we may suddenly find that he has passed through the walls we build up around us and has been with us all along, speaking and working through the people around us, through the people who speak words of comfort or real advice to us, who support us, who stand with us in whatever difficulty and pain we may be experiencing. And, of course, Jesus is with us in the joys we experience in life - he came to bring joy - and surely the promise of resurrection, new life, out of pain is one of the greatest joys we can have.

I had finished here - until I read the Holy Week and Easter Church Times (13 April) and so I finish with a few paragraphs from Bishop of Worcester Dr John Inge's article '*Joy cometh in the morning*' in which he talked about the way that joy and woe (resurrection and pain) are interwoven. He refers to William Blake's words:

Man was made for Joy & Woe
And when this we rightly know
Thro' the World we safely go.

Joy and Woe are woven fine
A Clothing for the soul divine
Under every grief & pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.

Dr Inge writes:

'Joy and woe have been much on my mind since my wife died on Easter Day three years ago, leaving me and my two daughters bereft. Since her death, sorrow has often prevailed, but joy has crept up on me unawares, as it can do even in times of desperate sadness..... It is indeed true that 'under every grief & pine runs a joy with silken twine.'

Flashes of joy are intimations of the profound truth that, although joy and woe are 'woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine' in this world, it will not be so in God's future. The Christian hope - resurrection hope - tells us that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, or height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8.38-39).

Love will prevail. God will prevail. Joy will prevail.'

Alleluia, Christ is risen and is with us - today and always. Amen