

Christ is risen, He is risen indeed

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Low Sunday, 12 April 2015 in St Peter's Wolvercote. Reading: John 20

Last week, in the excitement of Easter day, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead - our assurance that sin, suffering and death can never be victorious over God. And we continue to celebrate, because it wasn't just another 'event' in history', about 2000 years ago, it still has REALITY, existence, in our lives today. There are two aspects of this that I wanted to talk about: one is that Easter would have no real meaning without those dreadful days that preceded it, and the other is the way in which we can recognise Christ as present with us today.

We can't separate the joy of Easter day from the events we marked in Holy Week - especially Good Friday. Easter is the 'completion' if you like, of something that has its roots in human sin and suffering and so it is something that can give us tremendous HOPE. All of us go through tough times but Easter reminds us that, however dreadful things may seem at the time, new life, new hope, can come out of them. It won't come straight away - we may have to go through the fear and despair the first disciples experienced in that upper room - but it will come - and if not in this life, then in that new life that Jesus showed us.

Recently I watched a programme that had been broadcast a while ago around 'Holocaust Day'. It was about the **filming** of the relief of various concentration and death camps. You've all seen such programmes - with scenes of horror and cruelty we would probably not have thought possible if we hadn't seen such pictures. It showed the worst sides of human nature - the depths of depravity and cruelty we are capable of when we turn away from God, and concentrate only on satisfying our human desires for power and physical gratification. These human traits were at work on Jesus. The Jewish authorities didn't like Jesus criticising them for trying to satisfy their desire for power and comfort at the expense of others and so they tried to get their own way by torturing and executing Jesus. But Jesus rose again - he overcame torture and death - and so he seems to be assuring us that out of the most awful of human situations can come new life.

It's difficult to see how there could be any 'resurrection' from those terrible events of the holocaust, and yet we do have many accounts of people who, even in the depths of human suffering, were capable of most extraordinary actions for the sake of other people, or who refused to give up their faith, or who were capable of forgiving those who tortured them. One thing that surprised those doing the filming was how quickly the people who had survived recovered. Once their physical health had been improved (often after only 2 or 3 weeks) the ladies, particularly, were lining up to look for new clothes, make-up. The return to health wasn't just physical, it was spiritual in spite of the terrible things they had been through. There was no suggestion that they would ever forget their experience, or the awful fate of many of their friends, but you could see that life had been restored in the most amazing way.

There were a number of articles in the Easter Tablet about 'new life' coming out of suffering. The first (one of the Editorials) addressed the problem of evil and suffering. As in all of the articles, it didn't seek to diminish suffering and horror, to 'intellectualise' it, explain it away, but to see something of Christ's passion and suffering in our human suffering and to point out that suffering is the corollary of LOVE. Suffering wouldn't matter if someone didn't *care*, didn't love those who were suffering. It went on to say that suffering is eased with Christian compassion, and in this way, evil is resisted with love.

Another article highlighted something that is frequently pointed out - the fact that going through a time of great suffering can make people far more understanding of others, more compassionate, more capable of loving. It referred to Rowan Williams' book 'The Wound of Knowledge' in an assertion that we can never

really come to our true selves unless we have gone through a time of brokenness and received the GIFT of God's healing. It asserted that *this* sort of transformation leads to a kind of softening, and the possibility of solidarity. We have allowed our wounds to break us open, to deepen our compassion for ourselves and for those around us.

When we look back, then, at times of suffering we can often see something of new life come out of them. And this isn't just an attempt to 'justify' suffering in any way, give it some meaning, or diminish it in any way. It is a fact of life! And it is also something that Jesus teaches us to believe in. If we believe in his words and in his resurrection then we must believe in his promise of new life out of suffering and even death. It is, then, a question of faith to look for such new life, for if we give in to despair then sin, suffering and death have claimed victory over us. The second article also asserted that as individuals, and sometimes as the Church, one day we will find ourselves in a place where we are faced with the choice either to despair or to hope. Like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, we may have no sense of what we are hoping for, but faith hopes anyway, waiting despite ourselves for something besides the silence of the grave.

Most resurrection experiences will not be a sudden event like Jesus' appearance to Mary. Most will be slow processes, a gradual realisation of new light and life ahead. And, of course, whatever life we find, it will not be the same as it was before, and I believe Jesus' resurrection appearances hint at this, because Jesus was never recognised immediately. His human form had changed, in some way. The disciples gathered in fear in the upper room didn't recognise him immediately – they thought he was a ghost. Mary didn't recognise him in the garden, the two walking on the road to Emmaus didn't recognise him. Some of you may have seen another TV film – 2 or 3 years ago, of Christ's Passion and Resurrection. In it, different actors portrayed Christ in the different resurrection appearances. It felt quite odd, uncomfortable, but it is what the Bible describes. So Jesus didn't look the same, rather he was recognised by something he did - by showing the wounds in his hands and his feet, or by breaking the bread, or walking on water, or by speaking a word 'Mary'. So, for us today, we must not expect Jesus Christ to appear to us in a way that we instantly recognise him and Jesus himself warned us of this – 'blessed are those who have not SEEN and yet have believed'. So we must try to discern his presence in the words and actions of the people around us, and in our hearts.

Whenever someone says kind words, or 'opens up' some of the words of scripture to us in a way we hadn't understood before, or speaks openly of God's unconditional love for us, then Christ is there. Whenever someone carries out an action of care or compassion, or reveals to us wounds that they have suffered as a result of their deep devotion to God's will, their determination not to allow evil, injustice, to win a victory, or reveals to us that they are bearing illness, misfortune with grace and trust because of their faith in God, then Christ is there. Sometimes when we have come through a particularly difficult time in our lives, we may realise that something was giving us strength to cope with things – perhaps the support and strength of other people, perhaps in an inner strength that we didn't realise we had. Then we can recognise that it was Christ walking with us. And, of course, Christ is revealed in 'the breaking of the bread' in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

So, today, we continue to celebrate – because, through his resurrection Christ can be with us, wherever we are, present to us through the power of the Holy Spirit – boundless, infinite. He will not be instantly recognised, but he will be with us in whatever life 'throws' at us, supporting and strengthening us. We celebrate because of the HOPE we are given that God can bring new life out of awful suffering and death; he didn't DESTROY suffering and death, they are part of human existence, but he demonstrated that he is with us in them and that they never have the last word as long as we KEEP FAITH with him. And we rejoice in the assurance that we are invited to be part of Christ's resurrection joy. Amen.