

Resurrection and Creation

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am on Sunday 22nd April 2012

Our first reading and our Gospel reading throw us into the resurrection of Christ today, which isn't surprising given that we are still in the middle of Eastertide. I want to offer you some reflections about resurrection, and to link those strongly to creation in various ways.

Resurrection of course is about the end of things – our destiny. Creation is about the beginning of things. But both are the work of God: no creature can create the universe; and no creature can raise the dead. I believe they hang together as a coherent scheme: what God starts in creation, he finishes in resurrection. So there ought to be themes which run through both and hold them together. Let me point to three things.

Firstly, and most obviously, resurrection is about the triumph of new life over death. It gives us hope for ourselves and for those whom we love who have died – hope that death is not the end of the story. Rather, by God's grace and through no power of our own, we will be transformed into a new physical-spiritual form of existence in which we will be ourselves, only the best we can possibly be.

Resurrection is about new life, and of course creation is as well. In the beginning, in creation, God calls the universe into being out of nothing; and at the end, in resurrection, he will call us back into new being out of death. So the first theme which links creation and resurrection is the theme of life.

The second theme is the theme of goodness. In the opening chapter of Genesis, we hear that wonderful majestic account of God creating the world in 6 days and resting on the 7th. I don't for a minute take that as a literal, historical account of the creation of the world. But truth is not necessarily nor only historical. I would say that that chapter and the one following contain amazing truths about the nature of God, the nature of the world and the relationship between God and humanity.

One of those truths is contained in the recurring refrain: "And God saw that it was good". God says "let there be..." And it was so...And God saw that it was good. It's a ringing endorsement of the original, essential goodness of this physical universe. The matter from which we are made is a positive thing. The spiritual which emerges in and through the material is a positive thing. And God rejoices in both, in all he has made. But I want to ask, how do we know that the author of Genesis 1 is right? How do we know that it's not just wishful thinking on his part that the universe is good? After all, when we look round the world, we see some awful things, as well as plenty of good. Was the author right or wrong?

This is where resurrection comes in. To me Christ's resurrection affirms the intrinsic goodness of the world God has made. For a start it says that the material bodies we inhabit, the memories and relationships we build up through them, the personalities we develop within them, are valuable enough, good enough to be raised. God wants to preserve them in a new perfected form of existence. But also, resurrection conveys the clear message that all the evil thrown at Christ on the cross will not prevail; it will not have the last word. Rather it will be overthrown by God's act of resurrection – and that to me is a positive – a good act coming from a good God who billions of years ago created a good world.

So resurrection I think links to creation in this second way as well – by confirming that the author of Genesis 1 was absolutely right: the world we live in is a world whose DNA is good, because it comes from the good act of a good God.

So far we have the themes of life and goodness connecting creation and resurrection. The third and final theme is about direction and destiny. Obviously I can't know for sure, but I believe that the reason God created is that he wanted a universe in which personal beings capable of relating to him might emerge. On this planet earth, we human beings have evolved. On other planets elsewhere in the universe, there are probably other forms of personal beings equally loved and valued by God.

If you read scientific accounts of the first moments of the universe, one thing which seems to emerge is the idea that there are four forces involved – the strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity and electro-magnetism. And furthermore, that they are extremely carefully balanced to allow this universe to develop.

If they had been even slightly differently balanced one way, the matter in the universe would have expanded so fast that stars and planets could not have formed, and hence life could never have emerged. Or if they had been slightly differently balanced in another way, the opposite would have happened: the universe wouldn't have expanded fast enough and gravity would have made it collapse back in on itself, and again life would not have emerged.

You have to ask, is this chance? Well it could be, but it could also be that there was a divine hand setting the dials, so that those forces were fine-tuned in just the right way for life to emerge in the universe.

I certainly believe that God did carefully balance those four forces to create a universe with potential and with dynamism. It's not a static creation, not the finished article, but an open, evolving creation. Certainly it has laws and order (we don't live in a chaotic quark soup, where everything is completely random). But within those laws there is also chance, openness, freedom, so that new things can evolve over time.

It's a universe on the move: out of the Big Bang, eventually stars and planets formed; on planets just the right distance from their star, plants emerged; later living organisms developed, and over billions of years they evolved into animals and eventually into personal conscious beings like us, who can think, choose, relate. And in personal conscious beings like us, spiritual awareness evolved, so that we have become worshipping beings aware of our dependence upon God and our relationship with him.

It's a universe with direction and purpose. And where are we going? Well again, that's where resurrection comes in. Because in Jesus' resurrection we get a glimpse, a foretaste of the destiny of the universe – the ultimate integration of the spiritual and material in a new level of existence through the hand of God raising Jesus into new life.

What we will be in that new life we can't yet fully know, as the epistle reading said. But, as it also said, "we will be like him" – like the risen Jesus. His resurrection gives us a glimpse of our destiny, and that of all personal conscious beings who wish to accept God's gift of resurrection. And of course, it will be a destiny shot through with life and goodness, way beyond our imagining.

So those are the three themes connecting creation and resurrection: first – life; second – goodness; third – direction and destiny. The effect of these on us now is, I think, to say to each and every one of us:

You have a goal to aim for, a purpose and destiny rooted in God.

Trust in that. Live your lives now in the light of it.

You are valuable, you are loved, there is an essential goodness about you.

Trust in that. Remember it when times are tough.

You have the gift of life now and, one day, new life beyond your imagining.

Trust in that. Draw strength and hope from it.

This morning, I have talked about the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. What I haven't talked about very much is the middle, life here and now. I haven't got time to do that today, so you'll have to come back in two weeks' time for Part 2, when I'm next preaching.

And there is a lot more to say. The beginning and the end are wonderfully positive – life, goodness, an ultimate destiny with God. The middle, as we all know, is more of a mixed bag. The universe is not all a bed of roses. Human beings have the potential for evil as well as good, as the daily news from Afghanistan and Syria, or the trial of Anders Breivik in Norway, reminds us.

So there is more to say about human sin and God's reaction to that. What does resurrection have to say about that? How might it help us re-interpret traditional ideas about Christ's death taking away the sin of the world, for instance which I know many people struggle with? So more in a fortnight, but for today, let's thank God for his gifts of life, goodness, direction and destiny – and the strength, structure and hope they give our lives.

Amen.