

The Reality of the Resurrection

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* on Easter Sunday, 31 March 2013, at 10.00 am at St Peter's, Wolvercote.

Luke 24, v.11 'But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus which is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Although there are variations in detail, the fact of the empty tomb is present in all four Gospels. So too are accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus – again with variations. For Luke, whose Gospel we have been reading this year, Jerusalem is the pivot to which Jesus journeys for his final ministry and death, where the risen Christ is seen, and from whence the Gospel spreads to the ends of the earth. Matthew and John record appearances in Galilee, and Mark's angel at the tomb directs Peter and the other disciples to Galilee. But all are agreed about the fundamentals of an empty tomb and physical resurrection appearances.

St. Paul bluntly tells the Corinthians 'If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain' (1,15, v.14). In today's gospel the messengers in the tomb challenged the women who have come to embalm and anoint Jesus' body with their spices with the question: 'Why look for the living with the dead?' The women's action was of course perfectly natural, but the challenge is a critical one. Let us suppose for a moment or two that Jesus was, and remains, dead: is St. Paul right, or can a worthwhile Christian faith survive without his resurrection? Death would not alter Jesus' actions or his teaching, and it would be perfectly possible to regard him with great respect, perhaps even to accept him as the greatest human being who has lived, who lived the loveliest life in his short time on earth. His life and teaching would still be worthy of study to achieve greater understanding. He could still be our pattern and example, a model for life. These are all hugely worthwhile things, and whilst falling short of full Christian faith, they can certainly have very positive outcomes. For me, St. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians overstates the case: although I do believe in the reality of the resurrection, I would also admit to the validity and effectiveness of the faith of some who find it difficult to accept that reality, at least in physical terms. Whether the Christian church would have survived, let alone grown and developed as it has, without the reality of the resurrection is quite another matter.

Jesus had, of course, spoken of his own resurrection at various stages of his ministry. But there are some things that are heard but simply not absorbed, because they seem to make no sense in terms of accepted ideas. Jesus' sayings on the subject were in this category: they made no sense in terms of the Jewish concept of resurrection, which was a large-scale event, a time when, after Israel's great and final suffering, all God's people would be given new life in new bodies. Their way of thinking simply did not allow for the concept of a single person being killed and raised to a new sort of bodily life beyond the grave. For different reasons, in the very different cultural context of our world today, we too struggle with this concept.

Central to today's gospel, then, is the *scepticism* of the disciples when the women bring to them the message of the empty tomb: 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'. It is Peter – as ever the man of action – who gets up and runs to the tomb: but when the women's story is confirmed, he goes home 'amazed at what had happened'. This scepticism continues through the resurrection appearances, where there is repeatedly a need to be persuaded. In Matthew's story of the appearance on the mountain in Galilee some doubted and hung back. In John both Mary Magdalen and Peter fail at first to recognise the risen Christ. In his first appearance to the disciples in the 'upper room', Jesus has to show them his hands and his feet; and he asks for something to eat, eating a piece of grilled fish, as

if to demonstrate the physical reality of his presence among them. Most famously of all, Thomas, who had been absent the first time, forcefully expresses his doubts and has to be convinced by physical evidence. The whole tradition which emerges from these accounts shows that belief in the resurrection was no pushover: it had to be impressed on the frightened survivors of Jesus' band of followers.

If Luke had been making up this story a generation or more after the event, as people sometimes suggest, surely he would have told it very differently. He would not have had women going first to the tomb, because women were not regarded as credible witnesses in biblical times. And he would have had the apostles believe the story at once – why emphasise disbelief and doubt, at the empty tomb and in the resurrection appearances, if the story is fabricated? This very tradition of doubt seems to lend authenticity to the gospel accounts.

But the ultimate reality of resurrection is not to be found in analysis of the biblical texts, important as that is. More critical is the evidence of what happened to the disciples, as their despondency was transformed – first disbelieving, then puzzled, then filled with joy. It was a transformation from bewilderment to understanding, from rejection and abandonment into a certain hope, from death to life, from despair to joy. It was a transformation sufficient to enable the disciples to undertake the very mission for which Jesus had prepared them – so strengthened that, against what must have appeared overwhelming odds, they not only kept the flame of the new Christian faith alive but succeeded in spreading it sufficiently for it to continue and flourish, growing and spreading even in the face of persecution into the worldwide church we know today. Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In this respect our reading from Acts today marks a critical landmark, as Peter brings the Christian faith to Gentiles and to Romans for the first time when he addresses the centurion Cornelius and his family and friends in Caesarea – not in itself the ends of the earth, which are still a long step geographically, but a now a much shorter step culturally to everywhere else in the known world, including Britain.

Such was the effectiveness of these early foundations that the reality of the resurrection is ongoing in the hearts of minds of millions of people today who seek to find in Jesus more than a fine example, more than a model or perfect pattern, but a living presence to help us to know how to live. We all strive imperfectly in that search, dogged by doubts and difficulties, but we strive none the less in the belief that the object is real, and is worth striving for. The opening mood of the first Easter morning was one of surprise, astonishment, fear and confusion, even among those who had lived with Jesus and heard his words. We can take comfort from this as we continue to struggle ourselves with the nature and meaning of the resurrection. Unlike the disciples, we have the wisdom of hindsight, but there is a sense in which the very continuation of these inner struggles makes Easter always a surprise, whether we meet it as now in celebrating the feast itself, or in surges of God's grace in our own lives or in the wider world.

I should like to end with some words by a Benedictine monk and biblical scholar, Henry Wansbrough, who was Master of St. Benet's Hall here in Oxford until a few years ago. It is the briefest of prayers but I think its words get to the heart of the way we may approach our struggles with resurrection and faith:

Lord grant me an openness to your word, but also a firm scepticism. Give me a strong faith, but help me to avoid the credulity which reduces your saving truths to silliness and brings contempt upon your generosity.