

Good Friday God – Easter God

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers on Easter Day (4th April 2010) at St Peter's Wolvercote

In some ways, the resurrection story has something in common with a fairy story like Sleeping Beauty: the Princess falls asleep for 100 years, surrounded by the power of evil, only to be awakened by the kiss of a prince and restored to new life. Our prince "falls asleep", seemingly overcome by the power of wicked people, evil and death only to be awakened 3 days later by the kiss of the Holy Spirit, and raised to new life. They may be similar in some respects, but there are several important differences between them.

Firstly, Jesus' resurrection is rooted in history in a way which a fairy tale is not. When we look at the disciples after Jesus' death, we see an enormous change which took place in them. Immediately after Jesus' death, they were broken people. They locked themselves away in an upper room for fear of being arrested and killed themselves. Yet 6 weeks later, those very same people were standing in the middle of Jerusalem, preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were no longer afraid of being arrested or killed. And they went on preaching that message throughout their lives, without concern for their own safety, and indeed many of them were killed for doing so.

Something happened to change them - the experience of meeting Jesus alive again, recognisably the same and yet transformed into a new existence. That change in the disciples roots the resurrection in history as an event which changed the course of history. Without it we probably wouldn't have heard of Jesus, the church wouldn't exist and we wouldn't be worshipping here at St Peter's this morning. Because of the change in the disciples, we can detect the resurrection in the warp and woof of history in a way which we can't with a fairytale.

The second difference between the resurrection and a fairytale is that there is a gritty reality in resurrection which there isn't in fairytales. So often in fairytales there is a moment when the magic wand is waved or the kiss is given and all is set to rights. It's as though, all the tragedy and evil that has taken place has never been. It's tippexed away and they all live happily ever after.

In Jesus' resurrection, though, there is a significant detail which makes it radically different. Jesus is raised with the wounds in his hands and feet and side still there. Remember the story of doubting Thomas? When Jesus appears to him, he tells Thomas to touch his wounds, to put his finger in his side. They haven't been tippexed away; they haven't been forgotten. And that is important, because it tells us that in the act of raising Jesus, God has not forgotten and will never forget what happened on the cross on Good Friday. Easter and Good Friday are eternally intertwined in God's heart. Gritty reality is present in the heart of God. It is important for us that they are.

If Good Friday was all there was, we could be grateful that God had stood in solidarity with us in our suffering. But we would have no hope that our suffering might be transformed and death overcome. And if Easter and resurrection was all there was, God would be a fairy godmother arriving from on high to wave his wand - powerful, yes, but essentially distant from us, unknown to us. Hold the two together, cross and resurrection, and we have a God who is there alongside us in the gritty reality **and** above and beyond us - vulnerable, compassionate, caring **and** creative, redemptive and transforming. We need both.

The final difference I want to mention between resurrection and fairytales is the speed with which things happen. In fairytales, a lot is instant - the kiss, the wave of the wand and everything is fine. With the resurrection, it is different. We don't have to look very far in our world to know that Jesus' resurrection has not made everything perfect. Wars, famines, earthquakes continue. Human beings still fall out, suffer and die. Resurrection is work in progress - in no way finished, and it won't be this side of the grave. But that doesn't mean it isn't happening in the here and now.

I can think of someone I know who attempted suicide because of deep depression. She was found in time; she came through the worst and though depression has not left her completely, she copes well. And through that experience she has volunteered for the last 20 years as a Samaritan, listening to others who are at their wits' end. She has had a new lease of life. Think of Northern Ireland or South Africa. At one stage, the grip of corporate evil was immensely strong in both places. But by God's grace, people have found new life. Not everything is perfect, nor will ever be. The hurt and wounds, like Jesus', are still there just below the surface. But new, creative ways of living have emerged and there has been a transformation - a resurrection.

I've known losses and failures in my life, which seemed shattering at the time. I still feel the pain of them, I still carry the wounds, but with God's help I have grown through them and found new ways of living and even realised that failure can have very freeing and creative aspects. These to me are instances of God's resurrection at work - slowly, patiently working with how the world is and how we are, alongside us as well as above us; inspiring us to resist evil and all that shrivels us and drags us down, and instead to put on Christ and embrace Christ-like ways of living - resurrection life. It's slow work, but it's real in a way which magic wands are not.

So today we are not celebrating a God who wafts down from on high, resplendent in a sparkling tutu, weaving some instant magic with his wand - a God who is essentially aloof from the nitty - gritty of human life, just arriving at the end to set everything right. No, we're celebrating a God who gets stuck in and becomes vulnerable in Jesus; who goes to the cross and becomes totally one with human pain, human grief and human sin. And then, with wounded hands, binds up our wounds with infinite patience and gentleness, leads us through the inevitable losses and failures of life into new life; and who gives us hope - Easter hope - that evil, sin, suffering and death, however strong they may seem, will NOT have the last word. God in us and beyond us; Good Friday God - Easter God intertwined, interwoven. Alleluia.