

Easter 2009 - Canon Dr. Robert Innes

Today is the most important day in the Christian year. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the event which is of foundational importance for the church and for Christian faith. This year I, and perhaps you too, have anticipated Easter with especial eagerness, as at the end of a very long, cold winter it promises the warmth and new life of springtime. And so, this morning I invite us to reflect again upon this Easter event and to consider four broad implications for us today.

The resurrection of Jesus was and is completely unprecedented. There are no resurrections anywhere else in the Bible. Nowhere else does someone return to life with a new body which is recognisably the same body. So the men and women who had followed Jesus and seen him crucified were psychologically and emotionally completely unprepared for what happened. They had no intellectual schema in which to place it. The account from St. Mark we heard today conveys this particularly well. The women at the tomb feel alarm, bewilderment and fear. They are in shock.

Three things happen to the disciples that impress upon them the reality of what has happened. First what they see with their eyes: the tomb is empty, the stone has been rolled away and the body has gone. Second what they hear with their ears: firsthand or secondhand earwitness reports that Jesus has gone. Thirdly, and decisively, the experience of meeting Jesus again. As St. Paul reports: “he appeared to Peter and then to the 12 and then to 500 hundred of the brothers and then to James and last of all he also appeared to me.” It is all very physical, very much about people seeing, hearing, experiencing. There is absolutely nothing here to suggest that the resurrection is a matter of wish fulfilment or a psychological grief reaction or an attempt to find facts to back up some pre-existing ideology. It is from the physical data and the evidence of their senses that the disciples begin to conceptualise what has happened.

Actually the whole of the New Testament is concerned with unpacking what this Easter event means. As they reflected upon Easter, the first century Christians were convinced that God was present in Jesus in a way that he had never been present in anyone else. After the resurrection, they found they could not separate what God is doing from what Jesus does. God himself is no longer just “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” but the “God who raised Jesus from the dead”. If you ask which God the Christians are talking about – it is *that* God. And Jesus also is no longer just the earthly man who walked the streets of Galilee but a living presence in the lives of those who follow him.

In the light of the resurrection, Jesus is for us not just a *memory* but a *contemporary*. That is the only way of understanding most of what is going on in this building today. The Church isn't like the Elvis Presley Memorial Society, dedicated to singing songs to keep alive the founding memory of its dead founder. Jesus is a reality over and against us. We relate to Jesus as someone who calls us and stands with us. That's why the church declares that Jesus is alive.

When we read the Bible in church, we don't read scripture as an interesting historical document but because we hope it will speak to us today. In a few minutes we are going to baptize baby Amelia. Baptism is an initiation rite in which we claim that Amelia will be linked into the life of Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. Later in

our service we share in communion – not just a memorial meal but an event which claims to feed us spiritually with the body and blood of Jesus. All these things only make sense because Jesus is not just a memory but our contemporary.

Now if this is all true, if the regular activities of the worldwide church are more than just some gigantic theatrical misunderstanding, then this has implications far beyond the hour or two we might spend in a special building once a week on a Sunday. If Jesus is alive then some very profound and wonderful things follow. I'm going to mention four. They're these: humanity is precious; things can change; fear can be conquered and there is hope for the world.

Firstly, humanity is precious. The risen Jesus is a physical, human being who bears wounds in his flesh, who talks with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, who eats a fish supper with them. Jesus's body is not a temporary inconvenience that he bears just for this mortal life. Jesus does not return from the grave as a disembodied spirit or a spook, but as a radiant and strong human being.

If you've been to a wedding in the Orthodox Church you'll know that the bride and groom are crowned as queen and king. It's a ceremony which conveys upon the couple glory and honour. And it echoes the Christian understanding that we the church will one day be crowned as the bride of Christ. The risen humanity of Jesus is our humanity and we therefore predestined for glory.

This is exceptionally relevant because today because: in our society there are many people who struggle to feel significant; the personal and cultural histories of many people make it difficult for them to feel strong self-worth; and across the world there are far too many places where life is cheap. My brother-in-law leaves Europe shortly to work for Oxfam in the northern most part of Uganda where thousands of small children have been kidnapped from their families and trained as soldiers to kill. By contrast, the resurrection of Jesus requires us to have a very high view of the dignity of human life. Whether the little baby with his or her life still ahead of them, or the very elderly person full of years, all are worthy of the highest respect and dignity because they are human persons. At his resurrection Jesus receives a new body. Human bodies are the pinnacle of God's creation. Humanity is precious.

Secondly, things can change. On Good Friday it seemed as if the message of Jesus had been effectively stamped out. Jesus himself had been executed and his followers were in hiding for fear of their lives. But the resurrection effected an extraordinary reversal. The disciples discovered a new energy that would impel them to take the gospel across Israel and around the Mediterranean. Within a generation the Christian community had become large enough to be singled out by Emperor Nero for especial persecution following the great fire of Rome. It was a remarkable change.

Jesus followers founded a new community, the church, which embodied his values. These values have often proved inconvenient for powerful totalitarian regimes of which the Roman empire was simply one. In our own generation, Christians have been an irritation to oppressive regimes in the Soviet Union, in China, in many African countries, in Burma. It is part of the gospel message that the world can and will change to be conformed more closely to God's own values of justice and peace.

Change is possible at a world level. It is possible too at an individual level. We can become different people. We are not entirely bound by our pasts and by our environment. Of course, we don't have completely freedom just to re-invent our personalities. There are constraints. But perhaps part of what it is to be a saint is to be someone who is able to transcend these constraints to a remarkable degree. And I would think most of us will know someone whose has been an example to us, whose character we admired, whose life shone. And so history is not bound to repeat itself. Jesus resurrection was a supremely creative event. Creative things happen to people and communities. Things can change.

Thirdly, fear can be conquered. If there is one dominant emotion in the closing verses of Mark's gospel it is fear. And with good reason. Crucifixion was a terrible way to die. If their leader had been killed, the disciples knew that they might be killed too. The disappearance of Jesus body just adds to the fear and bewilderment. Yet the really good news of the resurrection is the triumph over fear and in particular of the fear of death: "thine be the glory risen conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won".

Don't get me wrong. Death itself remains just as real. Last week I conducted the funeral for a gifted man who died of cancer in his mid-40s at the peak of his career. The shock, and sadness and grief felt by his parents and friends ran very deep. The resurrection by no means sets these feelings aside. But what Easter Sunday says is that God is there on the other side of death. When we are at the end of our resources, God is not at the end of his. Death is real, but there is eternal life beyond death. Though our own horizons end with death, God's perspective envisages horizons that are greater than ours. It is deeply significant that the first words of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection are 'do not be afraid'. The first disciples learned to look death in the face. And if, like them, we can learn to do that, then other fears as well fall away.

Over these last few months, most of us will have been caught up to some degree in the rising tide of anxiety caused by the financial crisis. Many have lost their jobs, many others live in fear that they may lose their jobs. It is especially at times such as this that we need firm foundations for our lives. The accumulation of money and the pursuit of success are not, ultimately, secure and good ways to live. We need spiritual values anchors that can hold us firm when the bad times come. So we too need to hear those words of Jesus "do not be afraid" or elsewhere where he says "I have overcome the world."

I find the letters of St. Paul deeply inspiring because of the complete sense of rootedness that Paul displays. Through shipwrecks, beatings, rejection, unfair trials and imprisonment he stands firm. As a wonderful hymn puts it: "through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy the praises of my God shall still my heart and mind employ. Fear him ye saints and you will then have nothing else to fear. Make you his service your delight, your wants shall be his care." Jesus has triumphed over death, the most potent source of human fear. And with this fear other fears also can fall away. Fear can be conquered.

Fourthly, there is hope for the world. In the resurrection, God does not cancel out the material world, he transforms it. The resurrection takes place within our world, and

offers hope of what our world can become. It is precisely this world that God is interested in redeeming.

That means it isn't just human nature which we should be interested in, but the whole realm of nature and ecology. In a key verse in the letter to the Romans, St. Paul suggests that the whole creation will in some way share in the liberation from decay that is brought about by the resurrection of the Lord.

That is very important, because if you speak to scientists and ecologists about the future of the world, you often don't get much of a sense of hope. We have a leading environmental scientist in our own congregation here, and he is not optimistic. As he said to me, if the whole world were the size on an orange, then the thickness of that band of earth and atmosphere which is home to animal and plant life would only be the thickness of a piece of tissue paper. It is very fragile and easily torn. And we are struggling to implement fast enough the radical changes that will be needed to human lifestyles if the ecology of the planet is to be saved. Therefore to know that God is committed to our planet, to know in our hearts that there is hope for the world, that is a vital antidote to ecological paralysis and despair.

Let me draw to a close. The resurrection is the foundational event of the church. Without belief in the resurrection you can't understand most of what goes on in the church's life. But the implications of the resurrection go far beyond this religious institution. They tell us that humanity is precious, that things can change, that fear can be conquered and that there is hope for the world.

And what about us today, this morning. How can we respond to all this? How can we access it? Let me suggest three things.

Firstly, perhaps you today might recommit yourself to living within the landscape that I have mapped out this morning. If your life is built on shaky foundations, perhaps you might consciously try from today to build on the foundation which is Christ and his resurrection.

Secondly, you might re-connect with the church. It could be this one, but it might well be another one. The brand and the location don't matter. But the church is the community which is entrusted with the message of the gospel. It is here that faith can be nurtured.

And thirdly, you might pray that God will give you the knowledge and the experience of Jesus and his resurrection in your own mind and heart. It can be all too easily a story that we are happy to live with at a distance or that we consign to a childhood reminiscence or that we think is mainly for other people. But today, in the words and the music and the drama of this act of worship, I invite us all to ask God to make himself known to us again and afresh and anew.

I wish you a very happy Easter. Amen.

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