

Easter Day 2017

On Passion Sunday, two weeks ago, we asked whether our conviction of salvation through Christ derived its force more from Good Friday and the cross or Easter Day and the resurrection?! Our first hymn of today, Jesus Christ is risen today, suggests that salvation certainly began on Good Friday; “but the pains that he endured (on the Friday) our salvation have procured”. And we thought about this at some length on Friday afternoon. Yet today we surely want to say, “isn’t this conviction of salvation, ‘procured’ through the witness and power of suffering love, only truly achieved and validated and glorious because, “*Jesus Christ is risen today*”,... on this “our triumphant holy day!” The victory of the cross conquers because of the triumph of the resurrection. The divine offer of forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ (on the cross) has authority, because God raised Jesus! Because of the resurrection we can sing, “now above the sky he’s king, where the angels ever sing!” The resurrection crowns and adorns the passion!.... resurrection power and glory supplies the necessary evidence, the demonstration, that what was accomplished on the Friday is more than incidental; rather, that it is from God, and that it is capable of life-changing, world-shaping transformation. Resurrection, we might say, is the missing piece of the jigsaw, it’s the yin to the yang, it’s the match to the touch paper!

By rights, we say today *not* that, ‘Jesus rose from the dead’, but that God raised him! Resurrection is a divine dynamic. Difficult as it is to speak in these terms, we can think of resurrection as a gift to humanity and creation, that in its first ‘break-out’, supplied divine authority to what was played out in a human drama. Through the resurrection we know that death is not the end. Death does not have the last word. Rather God has the last word, which is of course the first word. Resurrection as a gift from God sets in motion something that has never ceased to overturn our worst fears, change people, transform expectations and undermine the

death-dealing grip of cynicism, bitterness and despair. It is a great and mighty wonder!

More than anything, it seems to me that the security or veracity of the resurrection is about the witness of disciples in the appearances; and primarily not so much about the testimony of the gospel writers, critical as this is, or its factual accuracy, or inerrancy, but about the conviction generated in disciples that the Lord was risen, that he was alive again – alive to them, alive therefore to an emerging Christian community, and so alive for the world. This is what the scripture communicates.

As we know, Mark has no resurrection appearance of Jesus to anyone. Yet tremendous energy of resurrection is contained in the empty tomb, the terror and amazement of the women as they flee and the witness of a young man dressed in a white robe saying that Jesus has been raised and is going ahead to Galilee, there they will see him!... What we recognise is that something has been set in motion that cannot be held down. As we read today, Matthew's account takes Mark's account (which Matthew probably had available to him) and adds drama through a great earthquake and the appearance of an angel rather than a young man to the women, urging just the same, however, 'he is not here, he has been raised' and, again, 'is going ahead to Galilee'. Matthew also includes a brief appearance to the women in which Jesus encourages them to tell the disciples that they will see him in Galilee. When they get there Matthew then records the memorable mountain-top meeting where the disciples are commissioned. This abrupt, crescendo-like ending to the gospel conveys a stirring, emboldened sense of disciples empowered by the Risen Lord to go and make more disciples of all nations – *in the power of the resurrection!* This is what resurrection achieves!

The re-invigoration which took hold of the first disciples, and propelled them into a new sense of the presence of the Risen Christ, and of their

own empowerment to serve him and carry forward the mission of the kingdom of God, is the most faithful testimony to resurrection! As we re-read the story, and celebrate its glory and wonder in this liturgy, we are gripped again by the narrative. As we do, so we too are indeed 'set aflame with the fire of God's love', the new fire of love, courage and conviction that allows us to serve and witness and worship and pray with new hope and expectation and urgency. As Paul says, "in Christ we are", through his death and resurrection, "become a new creation", no longer dead in the flesh but alive in the Spirit. Resurrection re-births us and re-ignites us to become a kingdom of priests serving our God together – in the priesthood of all believers. Empowered by the resurrection, the inner knowledge of life beyond death, nothing need make us afraid. Terror and amazement is become passion and power.

Resurrection is about salvation and about the tomb-shattering, breathtaking promises of new life in Christ. It is also about creation and about living. We see signs of resurrection as resurgence all around us in the natural creation, especially at this time of year. As I speak, new life is powering its way through the earth and up into the skies in roots and blossom and leaf. You may already be seeing the first shoots appearing from the potatoes you planted recently as the tubers die and disintegrate. Death gives way to life. Philip Larkin put it very well; "The trees are coming into leaf like something almost being said, their recent buds relax and spread, their greenness is a kind of grief.... and yet the unresting castles thresh in full-grown thickness every May. Last year is dead, they seem to say, begin afresh, afresh, afresh.".... As the earth regenerates herself, we seek to reinvigorate our commitment to be her good stewards. And we know the challenges are very great. Unhealthily high levels of nitrogen dioxide from diesel emissions are currently causing deep concern as unacceptable damage is being done to children's health in major cities. A fortnight ago I arranged for a Guardian journalist to visit Edgbaston and Ladywood to interview our headteacher Shirley Atkar

because the school is less than 150m from a road where NO2 emissions are at an illegal level according to DERFA statistics i.e. the Hagley Road. The issue is twofold: what can adults do to make their children safer and what can be done through local councils and the motor industry to cut emissions and create emission-free zones? Word is that we as a city are well behind London on this. It is a salutary irony that at the same time as the planet is one of our great symbols and sources of resurrection through the renewal of life, it is in so many ways dying: the oceans, the air we breathe, the ozone layer and hydroflourocarbons, the ice caps, global warming, storms and weather patterns, disappearing species and biodiversity. If we are to witness *true resurrection for the planet*, we need to be sure that we keep making and supporting initiatives to tackle these matters, whether taken by NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth or government departments.

In our living also, resurrection is always happening to us and around us, if only we might notice it. I was struck yesterday to see on the BBC news website that we are at the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act that legalised relations between men over 21 in 1967. On the website in a podcast interview Lord Owen speaks of his contribution to the debate in parliament back in 1966 and of the impact of the bill; of how we have ‘moved light years’ in his opinion in terms of attitudes to being gay, describing the change that has taken place as phenomenal. And notwithstanding hurdles to equality and respect that remain, not least in the churches, it is astonishing to think of how far we have progressed since that time. If once gay men lived tortured, secret and solitary lives with the constant threat of public humiliation it may not be too much to say that social attitudes have been broken apart to yield something far more humane and gracious, in a manner that could be described as resurrection – from deathly oppression to a wholly recalibrated life widespread of respect and regard. It was a wise choice when the gay community chose the word ‘gay’ as a descriptor – ‘good-as-you’. This has

been proved through the courageous, truthful and extraordinarily gracious witness of very many gay people, to whom we owe a great debt.

If we stand back and look at these two struggles, for example, for equality before the law and human regard and for environmental justice, it is perfectly clear that all we would wish for is not yet achieved. This tells us that the gift of resurrection life may be able to release its powers only slowly, and may take time to bequeath its gifting. This should not prevent us, however, from praying and living for its reality in our lives and the life of society – because it is God’s gift to the world, through Christ and because of Christ – and it *will* break through! In the Prayer Book communion service, the creed ends by saying, “look for the resurrection of the dead,” – and how right that is! We should always be looking for resurrection to be breaking through; and we should never look down.

Let us then on this holy and joyful day, as we are released from every bondage to sin, as we are re-created in Christ to serve him afresh in the Galilee of our lives, be deeply encouraged, emboldened and empowered. From Matthew 28 v.10, “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’” Amen.

1677 Words
Reverend Julian Francis
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APPENDICES

Resurrection Appearances

As we know, Mark has no resurrection appearance of Jesus to anyone. His gospel ends with the women fleeing in terror and amazement and saying nothing to anyone! But, they had been told by a young man dressed in a white robe in the tomb that Jesus has been raised and is going ahead to Galilee, there they will see him!... Matthew repeats this story with his own special embellishments, but includes a meeting between Mary Magdalen and Jesus as she and the other women head to tell the disciples what they have witnessed. There is then a meeting of the disciples and Jesus on a mountain top in Galilee where they are commissioned. Luke's account follows Mark and Matthew and adds the story of the two disciples walking to Emmaus, being met by Jesus, who later 'appears' to them at supper at the breaking of bread. There is also an appearance to all the disciples with Jesus saying, "Peace be with you" which is reminiscent of John's gospel. This culminates in Jesus leading them to Bethany where he is carried up into heaven in the ascension. John's gospel gives us more. There are four appearances, to Mary Magdalen in the garden, all the disciples in an upper room, to Thomas and to Peter, James and John, Thomas and Nathaniel on the beach after a fishing trip.

How reliable is the resurrection?

Sometimes we ask ourselves, especially if people ask us, or it gets discussed on television or radio, 'How do we know that the resurrection is secure?' How do we know that it was not a "conjuring trick with old bones", famously caricatured by Bishop David Jenkins?! From the account of the resurrection in Matthew's gospel another possibility is

outlined: that the resurrection was contrived through a clever sleight of hand by the first disciples. As we would say, it was a 'con'! In the verses either side of our gospel reading of today, Matthew records how the chief priests remember that Jesus once said that after three days he will rise again. So they go to Pilate and ask for a guard to be put on the tomb because they maintain that the disciples may go and steal Jesus' body and claim he has been raised from the dead! This is why our resurrection window on the south wall, taken from Matthew's account, shows sleeping guards. As the story goes, the chief priests have to put their own guard on the tomb and they make it secure. When on the Sunday morning the guards come to the chief priests and tell them what has taken place, the chief priests bribe them with money to say that in the night some disciples came and stole the body while they the guards were asleep. This construction on the resurrection remains a possibility, guards or no guards.