

## **Easter Sunday**

**St Mary's, Barnes, 2010**

Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive for evermore. (Revelation 1, 17)

Words addressed to John in the Book of Revelation.

If we try to judge the Resurrection of Christ by the ordinary course of history, it simply could not have occurred. Such things just do not happen. But it did not occur in the ordinary course of history. It happened within the sacred history of the people of Israel.

Christians and Muslims agree with Jews that God's disclosure of himself began not with Jesus or Muhammad, but with Abraham and the Jewish people. In the Hebrew Scriptures we read of a people who are called to live in a relationship of trust and love with God, indeed called to live as God's Son. Christians believe that this purpose came to a definitive focus in Jesus, through whom the possibility of being a true daughter or son of God is opened out to all people.

Yet all seemed to fail. Jesus was plotted against and killed by his opponents then betrayed and abandoned by his friends. On the cross he even seemed to be abandoned by the one he prayed to as Father. The Kingdom of God, the rule of God in human affairs whose presence and coming he proclaimed, seemed to come to nothing.

Then, on the third day his tomb was found empty. First a few, then many others claimed to have encountered the risen Christ. They risked and often gave their lives to bring this message to others.

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Unfortunately, the Western Church in its depictions of the risen Christ have gone for very literalistic representations, unlike the Orthodox Church with its much more symbolic rendering. We need to remember that Paul said that Christ was raised in what he called “a spiritual body.” It was not an ordinary human body resuscitated. It was transformed into a spiritual reality; transfigured into the stuff of eternal beauty, yet in a way which still showed the wounds of life.

This is of course impossible to imagine, but when the New Testament writers write about encounters with the Risen Christ of course it was natural and inevitable for them to do so in visual terms-the only terms we have got. But what we are talking about here is a mystery that cannot be described in ordinary human terms because it is a reality that has God in it.

It is easy to think of the Resurrection of Christ as a kind of reversal of the crucifixion. The cross meant defeat, the resurrection overturns that defeat. The crucifixion was failure, the resurrection brought final success. But properly understood the resurrection is a revealing as much as a reversal. Let me give a very simple analogy. A football team that is in fact much the better side is losing one particular match. Because of a combination of highly defensive tactics, dirty play and bad refereeing the better side is finding it very difficult. Then, in extra time a brilliant goal enables them to win after all. It is possible to see that goal as reversing the tide of play. But more significantly it reveals what a football match is really about, who is the better side. One side was better, played better and was finally revealed as better.

So the Resurrection of Christ is a reversal that reveals. It reveals that this man who was crucified was not only a human being, but is the eternal Son of God who has taken frail humanity to himself, and that this Divine/Human union, this binding together of the Immortal and the mortal, can never be undone. This is an eternal union of God and Man that nothing can sunder. God in Christ entered into the deepest darkness of our suffering and alienation, and even there bound humanity to his Father. Risen, Ascended, Glorified, our humanity in Christ is taken into God and bound to him for ever and ever.

The Resurrection of Christ is not an event like other events, because Christ is not just a man like other men. He is the Eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who went to the limit to gather us to himself, and from whom nothing can separate us if we put our trust in him.

It is not an easy time for the Christian Church today. In many parts of the world Christians are subject of hostility and oppression. In this county the prevailing intellectual climate is one of shallow scorn. In the population as a whole there is woeful ignorance of even the most basic facts, the meaning of Easter for example. Yet the message of the Church remains the most sublime good news that the world has ever heard or could hear. For, however, dark or anguished life seems to be because of the unceasing cruelty of we human beings to one another, God is with us, and nothing can separate us from him. As St Paul put it

For I am persuaded, that neither life nor death-nor things present or things to come.... (nothing in all creation).... shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8, 38)

We cannot begin to understand the Resurrection of Christ until we have taken on board the horror, as well as the beauty of life.

Moment by moment those horrors put a huge question mark against there being a wise and loving power behind the universe. But once you are open to the full impact of those horrors, you are also open to the extraordinary message that God in the form of his Son, has entered into them, not only into physical torture, but into the darkness of alienation from God that the sin of the world brings about. He identifies with us and continues to hold us and all people close to his Father.

T.S.Eliot once said that the highest goal of civilised man was “to unite the profoundest scepticism with the deepest faith”. The scepticism rises daily when we hear the news or read the papers. The only faith that can encompass that scepticism comes by looking at him who was crucified, risen and glorified. For if we turn to God in our distress, the God who meets us is the God who came amongst us in Jesus. If we turn to Jesus, the one who meets us is the Eternal Son of God who eternally holds us close to the Father.

This is the faith we celebrate this and every Sunday. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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And being glad in it, let us resolve to live faithful to it, and thereby to witness to it . For this is good news that the world desperately needs to hear, and it is through us, through our frail, weak human lives that the world will hear or fail to hear.