

Easter 5 sermon by Bishop Richard Harries (19th May 2019)

St Mary's Barnes

As we are still in the Easter season let us take the opportunity to think seriously about the most crucial and mysterious element of our faith - the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ - to whom be praise for ever.

First, the resurrection was not the resuscitation of a dead body like those figures climbing out of their tombs in paintings by Stanley Spencer. St Paul wrote that we are to be changed into a spiritual body, having continuity with who we are now- but utterly changed. In the Gospel accounts the risen Christ suddenly appears and then equally suddenly disappears. In some appearances the disciples do not at first recognise him. What they experienced is depicted as something life changing but finally elusive and mysterious.

What then is the evidence for its truth? First, the claim that a range of people experienced his risen presence. St Paul wrote

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²....

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This was written about the year 53. However, verse 3 contains the Greek words for receiving and passing on a tradition. In other words, Paul is recounting a message that went back to the earliest days of the church.

The second piece of evidence is that the tomb of Jesus was found empty and nobody was ever discovered. Two important considerations apply here. First, that the enemies of the faith never produced his body. They could quickly have demolished the Christian message if they had, but this never happened. Then, if some follower of Jesus had secretly taken his body to honour it, there would have been erected a memorial like others in the Jerusalem at the time. These two considerations do not of course prove that Jesus was raised from the dead, but they do show that alternative explanations have little validity. On the other side there is the undeniable fact that a small group of utterly broken men, and some women, who had fled the scene in horror, experienced something that not only turned their lives round but impelled them to give their lives to sharing the good news with others, and in some cases their life itself

A famous historian E.H.Carr said that history is a continuous interaction of the present with the past and further, and moreover that the facts we select and how we interpret them depend on the presuppositions of the present. This obviously includes both the zeitgeist of our culture and our own assumptions. So, first we have to ask what is the mind set of those approaching the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. If we come with a totally closed mind, the certainty that such a thing could never have happened, then of course we could never come to faith.

The philosopher Hume said that on the balance of probabilities, in the light of other miraculous claims that we know to be false, it was much more likely that the disciples were under an illusion than that what they said was fact. But this brings out the important point that the resurrection of Christ was not a miracle like other miracles. The first Christians claimed it was a new creation. It was comparable only with the origin of the world in the first place when matter appeared *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and the end of the world, when the whole of creation would be changed into the stuff of immortality. This in turn points us to the presuppositions of those first followers. Why did they interpret what happened in the way they did? They were of course Jews. They believed in a God who acted in history. They believed that God had chosen the Jewish people for a particular purpose. They had believed that this purpose was coming to a climax in the ministry of

Jesus, his teaching about the Kingdom of God, his healing and his call for people to follow him. All those hopes seemed totally dashed in his torturing to death on the cross. Then they suddenly experienced his living presence with them. Their prior beliefs influenced the way they understood this experience and reaffirmed what they had started to glimpse, namely that God was indeed acting in Jesus to bring in his kingdom. At the same time, it forced them to see that God's purpose was not an easy earthly triumph, but one brought about by suffering through death. They looked again at the Hebrew scriptures and saw that there were indeed passages there that seemed to point to such a startling conclusion.

Those were the presuppositions they brought to bear in interpreting their experience of the living lord and the claim that the tomb had been found empty. So, what about our prior assumptions?

St Paul wrote "For you were buried with him in baptism, and in that baptism, you were also raised to life with him through your faith in the active power of God, who raised him from the dead." (Colossians 2, 12). Again, he writes "Were you not raised to life with Christ? Then aspire to the realm above." (Colossians 3, 1). In other words, the Risen Christ was understood to be not just a person to whom they could pray but a reality in which one had become incorporated. They too had been raised to new life, Christ lived in them and they in him. The prior assumption that those Christians brought to bear was this mystical participation in Christ's risen life. It was in this light that they heard again and later read, the first stories of the finding of the empty tomb and the encounter of Peter, Paul and others with the risen Lord.

Now we are coming towards the end of the Easter period and looking to Ascension Day on Thursday week and Whitsun in two weeks' time, another important aspect of this truth emerges. In the period immediately after the crucifixion his followers had particularly vivid experiences of the presence of the Jesus they had known in his earthly ministry. Ascension and Whitsun indicate the fact that this intense,

vivid presence was only for a short period. Most Christians hereafter would know Jesus in a new way, not as a localised presence but through the Spirit of God in the deepest part of their hearts. Jesus was raised to a universal contemporaneity. In the immediate aftermath of his death, this was sharply focussed in a local presence but then he was released from the bounds of space to be present with everyone, everywhere, in terms of the challenges of their particular lives. The encounter of the risen Christ with the first followers was in relation to the particular circumstances and challenge of their lives, most dramatically when Peter is given the opportunity to say that he loves Jesus three times to match his three times denial. Now he meets us in the circumstances and challenges of our lives

Albert Schweitzer was a polymath—a brilliant organist, interpreter of Bach and theologian. He wrote a world-shaking book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus in which he criticised contemporary scholars, as he said, for looking down the long well of history and seeing their own faces at the bottom. He retrained as a doctor and went to Africa to found a hospital at Lambaréné on the equator on the West coast of Africa in what is now Gabon. At the end of his famous book he wrote

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside,

He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

(Those who would like to see an expanded version of this argument will find it in Richard Harries, Christ is Risen, Mowbray, 1988. It is out of print, but copies are available on Amazon)