

Sunday 8 April 2007: Easter Day

Resurrection

Reading: John 20.1-18

“The evil that men do lives after them and the good is oft interred with their bones” says Mark Anthony in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Fortunately that has not been my experience, or mercifully the Christian one. For we are called to believe that while evil leads to death it is goodness that lives on - Paul in his letter to the Romans puts it starkly:

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our faith again and again claim to lead not to condemnation and another Calvary but life, life in all its fullness.

On this day when we celebrate that life I am reminded of the prayer of Desmond Tutu we often use and sing at St Martin-in-the-Fields. Tutu, a man who has faced more than his share of the world’s evil, writes:

Goodness is stronger than evil
Love is stronger than hate
Light is stronger than darkness
Life is stronger than death
Victory is ours through him who loves us”

Or another passionate preacher of God’s redemptive love, Archbishop Romero, who knowing at first hand the nature of man’s inhumanity to man, and soon to be martyred, could, without bravado, preach:

I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that as a Christian I do not believe in death but in resurrection. If they kill me I shall rise again in the Salvadorian people. I am not boasting, I say it with great humility.

Romero was a man who portrayed very human fears and vulnerabilities and yet believed:

Christians cannot be pessimists. Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy. I have found at the darkest moments when slander and persecution were at their worst, to unite myself ultimately with the Risen Christ, is the deepest joy the heart can have.

Indeed I have often, in my own life, been amazed to see how life and hope do not die even among those whom on the face of things seem to have lost everything: it is a human dignity and resilience which can even face a Tsunami with courage.

But is this a hope and a truth we can really hold onto – or is it simply stoicism – a whistling in the wind – a shutting of the eyes in the face overwhelming odds? The whole of Holy Week has shown us the terrifying reality of human destructiveness which so called goodness did nothing to prevent. Evil has been very real and palpable and far too easy for us to visualise:

- a threatened leadership

- fear and paranoia- jealousy leading to conspiracy
- betrayal by individuals
- betrayal by religious leaders
- betrayal by state
- a fickle crowd
- public opinion stirred up and manipulated
- broken promises
- Jesus let down by confused and fearful friends who once promised undying support
- a traitor's kiss
- the corrupt mockery of justice
- taunting
- torture, blood, laughter
- a jeering crowd leering at death.

And you don't have to go back 2000 years to witness the reality of evil like this - you can watch it on your television every night of the week. In Iraq - in Abu Ghraib, in Guantanamo Bay, in Afghanistan, in Darfur, in the Lebanon, on the West Bank - but it's not even that far away either - for our own nation, like Pontius Pilate, cannot wash its hands clean of its own culpability in the suffering of our world.

But is resurrection also a similar reality for us to see, and to believe in? Of course it's easier to portray death than resurrection just as it's easier to portray evil than goodness. It has always been said that Milton's Satan was far more engaging and richly defined than Milton's God. Artists have long found it more compelling to paint a tortured and crucified Christ dying on Calvary - than an empty tomb. And what does Christ look like after the resurrection? Even his best friends don't recognize him.

And what is he wearing after he leaves the grave cloths behind? Can we believe in the transformation which has taken place- believe in it enough not just to justify the evil but to outweigh it? For Paul says that while sin flows, grace overflows.

When we talk about resurrection, as Harry Williams observes, we invariably relate to it as belonging to another place or time. We either confine it to the past and theoretically analyse the evidence and meaning of an event that took place a long time ago in Jerusalem, or we see it as something belonging to the future, something we will realise the reality of only after our own deaths and if it doesn't have a reality it won't make any difference because we will be dead anyway. Williams asks:

What interest can people be expected to take in fantasies of some life beyond the grave which look as though they are little more than wishful thinking?

Perhaps the answer is **no** interest, as we witness in the news story of a well known supermarket who this year felt it necessary to write a note of explanation on their Easter eggs which told customers that Easter eggs are a tradition which celebrate "the birth of Jesus Christ".

I used to believe that I would still be a Christian, even if there was no resurrection. Christ's humanity seemed enough for me - his radical love for the marginalised, his ability to forgive gave one hope, his utter humility, simplicity, a truth cutting through all hypocrisy - there seemed something beautiful in that. But I have through the events of my life begun to know that resurrection is not an apocryphal footnote that we can leave out. Resurrection is the story

itself, the whole of it. It is precisely the point where we end and God begins. Resurrection is miracle - God's miracle but that does not make it fantasy - it means it a reality beyond our understanding - a miracle as great or greater than life itself. How can we know this? – not as something confined to the past or somewhere in the future but something that takes place now, now in our own lives.

Stephen Verney, who is quoted on the front of this week's newsletter, writes that human language struggles to describe the resurrection and human thought to grasp it- so we are called not so much to understand it but to recognise it in our lives – to live it. Verney writes that in the Gospels we recognise the life that flowed through Jesus, it was like wind blowing like water running like light shining - he writes: "it came out of him with a power which was able to transform the self consciousness of women and men. John's Gospel tells us that this energy was called by Jesus resurrection.

'I AM the resurrection and the life' - the power of raising up and rising up. It was the energy of love transforming and making new. It was calling people out of their ego-centricity into new life. It was the energy of a love that did not die but continued to transform."

How does our Gospel describe the resurrection? It tells us little about the practical details or the science of it but describes resurrection through the human response to it. For like love resurrection transforms those who experience it. Today's Gospel captures that human response so vividly: Mary returning to the tomb on the first day of the week while it was still dark - returning to grieve and to a grave for this is her connection to the man she loves but saw die. We sense the quietness of the hour - the storm has passed but she believes everything is lost. But then something radically changes. The stone which blocked the entrance of the grave has been rolled away - the tomb is open, the tomb is empty. There is no decaying corpse, no lifelessness, no deadness. And at first that emptiness is even more frightening than a grave because, to coin that overused modern term, there can be no closure quite the opposite - only openness - openness to possibility, fear of the unknown - a future has suddenly opened up. Christ has once more escaped us and gone before us - calling us into a new journey which cannot be contained in a tomb.

And what does Mary do? She responds in the most wonderfully human impulsive way - she runs. She runs because she wants to tell someone, wants to witness. She runs because she is afraid and confused. But perhaps she runs too because a new story is beginning, one she fears, which is still a mystery, but where before there was a grave, a stone and a dead end - now the story is not over but has only just begun.

She runs

- running with news- like Mary running to her cousin Elizabeth
- running in a vague sense of hope like Zaccheus running ahead to try and see Jesus
- running like the Father of the prodigal ran in longing and in love
- running in search of Jesus not scattering, or running away in fear like the disciples at the Mount of Olives.

I have often tried to imagine the conversation taking place between Mary and the disciples, - a conversation full of adrenalin and anxiety, but perhaps too the beginning of a new revelation, the day break of God's possibilities:

"Peter! Peter! The tomb is empty!"

"Sit down Mary, sit down...what on earth are you talking about?"

"His body's gone... it's gone! The tomb's empty!"

“It can’t possibly be empty its blocked by the most massive stone.”

“It’s been rolled away - see for yourself”

“Mary what are you saying?”

“Calm down - you’ve been through so much. It’s easy to imagine things after all you’ve been through.”

“I’m not imagining anything. He’s gone! I don’t know where ...I can’t explain. He’s gone!”

And then perhaps the beloved disciple:

“Peter don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“He said ‘on the third day...’”

“What are you talking about? You... you yourself saw him die - held his body...”

“But don’t you remember... over and over again he tried to tell us something. He said he would be handed over to sinners, that he would be put to death but that on the third day....”

And suddenly those two disciples are running too - running towards a new life which is just dawning.

In dramas I have directed, as I have said, resurrection is difficult to capture - blood and agony is easier. But one morning down on the beach in the early morning sunshine I am with a group who are going to perform this drama. And far off along the beach - walking towards us through the shallow water - coming towards us out of the sun is the figure of one of our brothers. I point towards him far off: “Imagine... that is your brother. That is the one who was lost, who we love, who we have been looking for, who we thought was dead. He is your brother who you think you will never see again - what will you do?”

And all of them, all of us, began to run - run as fast as we could across the beach spraying up the water- running to meet the one we loved and thought was dead.

In my own life, when I have faced loss of those I love, I have become more aware of resurrection than ever before. It is the promise we run towards. Is it a mirage? Or the reality of something eternal?

I believe the latter. It is something given as gift rather than achieved. At a time of loss I wrote these words:

Resurrection begins in darkness

There is distraction

There is confusion

And uncertainty

In the mind and in the stomach

The yawn of despair

And I look round

And I cannot find who I am looking for

And there is a fear so caustic

That I will never find him again

And then Christ comes

Comes so simply

As though to dispel all fear

He comes like joy comes- without introduction

Like healing which has dissolved the pain

He comes

Like rain on a dry brittle land

He is simply there

Like light which ends the darkness with no struggle
For then it was dark
But now it is light
He comes with his balance and beauty
And order returns
Like a bird returning from another land
Spring comes
He comes with no explanation or reason
And there is a song
And a hope
And a future
We are surprised by his love
But he is not
For though he kept us waiting and doubting and trusting
He always knew he would never leave us.

He is risen.