

ALDHAM Sunday 23 March 2008 EASTER DAY

Readings: Isaiah 65 : 17 - 25; Acts 10 : 34 - 43; John 20 : 1-18

Hymns all WOV

290 (ii) Christ the Lord is risen today

277 The day of resurrection

441 Lord enthroned in heavenly splendour

303 Thine be the glory

Introduction

Have you been watching “The Passion” on BBC1 this last week? It was scheduled for two-and-a-half hours of prime-time viewing last Sunday, Monday and Good Friday. You can catch up with the last part tonight. I shall certainly be watching it, to see what they make of the Resurrection. So far it has stuck very close to the Gospel records but it also gives very good insight into

- the political situation and
- the relationship between church and state in Jesus day.

A commentator has noted that unlike other filmed Passions, this one is **not anti-semitic**. If you missed it, and want to see it, ask me afterwards and I'll arrange for you to borrow a DVD.

Four Festivals

The Resurrection is one of the 4 great events celebrated by the Christian Church. Easter combines two of those events, and is regarded as the **greatest of the Festivals**.

Firstly: We celebrate the **birth** of Jesus. The real significance of the birth of Jesus is not the manger, the shepherds and the Magi, but that it was **God himself** who was in the manger in the form of a human baby. God himself visited this planet to

- show us just a little bit what he is like
- to explain his plans,
- his values, and
- carry out his purposes through the words and life of Jesus.

We call this the **Incarnation**.

Secondly: We remembered and meditated on Jesus' **death** on Good Friday, because here was the **ultimate expression of God's self-less love** for us. God gave himself, not just to bear the agony of crucifixion, but to **bear the penalty for all our sin and shortcomings instead** of us. God **substituted** himself for us. And he did it in order to **open up the way** back to himself.

Some of us find the idea of a **substitute** difficult to understand. Yet modern football seems to depend on it. Some of us will have had power of attorney over an aging parent.

It's one person taking on a responsibility of and for another. On the Cross it was God taking the consequences of our failings instead of us.

Fourthly: (We'll come back to the thirdly in a moment.) We celebrate - albeit in a very low key these days - the release of the **Holy Spirit** on all and sundry. This is at **Pentecost**, fifty days hence. We celebrate the coming of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, to **continue his mission** through us, his followers - today. For example, when you know that God is alongside you in difficult times, that is the Spirit of Jesus.

So **Thirdly:** Easter Day. We celebrate the **Resurrection** of Jesus. A miracle. A one-off. It was at the heart of the preaching of Peter and Paul in the very early days of the church.

Unfortunately, it is also an event that has caused much disagreement in the church. You may remember the outcry in 1984 against David Jenkins the then **Bishop of Durham**. He argued that the resurrection of Jesus was not bodily. He believed - or at least he said he believed - that the resurrection was a just a **spiritual** resurrection in the hearts of Jesus' followers, when the going got rough. For him the tomb remained sealed with the decomposing body of Jesus still inside.

But we say very confidently, in all our creeds that "Jesus was raised on the third day." Bodily as the Bible says.

Why are we so sure? What is the evidence? There are many arguments attesting to the resurrection. Here are just 3.

We will see what the TV says tonight!

(a) It was in the interest of the **Jewish authorities** to produce the **body** of Jesus. They had had him killed, and they wanted him to stay dead. They feared that the very existence of their administration was in danger from Jesus followers.

[Acts 4] Within a few months of the crucifixion, Peter and John were up before Annas (ex High Priest) and Caiaphas (High Priest) for proclaiming the risen Jesus. This was the same Annas and Caiaphas who had brought Jesus to trial. If they or the Romans had been able to produce the body, then that would have been the end of Peter and John's ministry, if not the end of Peter and John! But they couldn't.

(b) Could the embryonic church have grown on the basis of a **deception**? There were a good number of witnesses to the risen Jesus. According to Paul, more than 500 brothers, that is ordinary people, as well as all the apostles. If Paul is here describing such a deception, then it was on a scale that would be very hard to sustain.

(c) If the Gospel records were made up, why did **all four** writers choose **women** to be the prime witnesses of the empty tomb? In those days women were **not even allowed to give evidence** in a court. If the gospel writers had invented a story with women as witnesses in their four slightly different accounts, they would have been "laughed out of court" so to speak. This does not "prove" that Jesus was bodily raised, but it makes it extremely unlikely that the resurrection was contrived some time after the event.

None of these is a theological argument. Nor are they linguistic arguments. They are **historical** arguments. The resurrection is a fact of history.

But it has **vital spiritual implications** for us.

Paul wrote:

1. Cor. 15:13 *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

So what is the meaning of the Resurrection for us?

1. Jesus lives.

I used to sing a chorus in my teens.

He lives, he lives,
Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me, he talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, he lives,
Salvation to impart.
You ask me how I know he lives -
He lives within my heart.

Today, we could have sung a hymn, written in 1751 which says the same thing:

JESUS LIVES! thy terrors now
Can, O death, no more appal us;

Jesus lives! our hearts know well,
Naught from us His love shall sever;
Life, nor death, nor powers of hell,
Tear us from His keeping ever.

A great hymn, but it comes with a dreary and quite difficult tune! Both express a **vital consequence of the resurrection**, namely that **Jesus is alive, knowable, accessible, and can be a personal saviour if only we will let him.**

The salvation he offers is on-going. The “in” way of describing the Christian life is that it is a journey - “along life’s narrow way” just as I sang more than 50 years ago!

Only the resurrection and ascension of Jesus can make it possible that Jesus to walk and talk with us today. Jesus is not a vague spirit that we try to communicate with. Many of you will testify that Jesus is a real person about whom we know, or we can know, a great deal if we read the four biographies.

Jesus [John 14:19] *"Because I live, you also will live."*

Paul: [Rom. 8:11] *Because God **raised Christ** from the dead, he will also **give life to your mortal bodies** through his Spirit, who lives in you.*

The NT uses **a number of pictures of Jesus:** a vine, a bride, a shepherd.

- If these are to mean anything today, then they must refer to a **living** Christ.
- If they are to mean anything to you and me, then **the life of the risen Jesus** must connect with you and me.

That is the very strong imagery of the Vine.

If you have been to **Hampton Court** around September, you will have seen the Great Vine. Thousands of bunches of black grapes up to 120 feet from the one massive root, 240 years old! The bunches are on the living vine, and in a sense, the vine is in the bunches, for it delivers sap to the grapes.

We can connect into the **living** root - the **risen** Jesus - if we choose. So long as we keep that **connection active** we have no excuse for not producing sweet fruit. If Jesus were not alive, if he were not risen, this would not be possible.

When we come to the **Lord's Table** in a few minutes, we come to be fed in a very special way by a **living Jesus**. How could we encounter Jesus in this Service if he merely died on the Cross? You can **remember** someone who is dead, but **you can't go on feeding** indefinitely from something that is dead.

We need the **power of Jesus** in us to enable us to keep going on the Christian journey day by day.

Why are the shops full of **Eggs**? Some have suggested that an egg represents the stone that rolled away from the tomb? I don't agree, for an egg is specifically designed to resist rolling!

I prefer to think of an egg as just one element of the ... chicken-egg-chicken-egg ... **sequence of life**. An egg speaks of an endless sequence of lives continuing through the generations.

Jesus lives! our hearts know well,
Naught from us His love shall sever;

2. The Resurrection offers hope

Paul: [1 Cor. 6:14] *By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, **and he will raise us also.***

The Easter message of resurrection means that the death we all must die **is not the end** for us.

But what kind of existence will it be? The **New Testament doesn't say much**. It's as though God wants it to be a mystery. I'm quite happy to trust God leave it to him.

But I expect the "resurrection of the body" means that somehow our personality, experience and sense will all be **preserved** by God. After all, he loved us enough to die for us on the Cross, and it was he who conquered death by breaking out from the tomb.

So although it's inevitable that we grieve and miss them when loved ones die, the Resurrection gives us a solid grounds for the **hope and joy of reunion**.

I like the way the writer of the **letter to the Hebrews** saw it. He had a vision of a kind of **celestial supporters' club**, urging and cheering us on to complete a **marathon**. He wrote, "*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*" (Hebrews 12.1)

Isn't that great? There will be a **reception committee** of friends and family there to greet us.

One more point, I think that when we accept that this present life is set in an eternal context, we begin to see it in a different perspective. Material things, things that we can't take with us, hold less importance. Other things become more important.

Hope, and a change of perspective.

3. However... there is a job to do.

The present **Bishop of Durham** is **Tom Wright**. He does not share his predecessor's unbelief, and he has written quite a **few articles** on the resurrection, **and the evidence** for it. Writing about the record in the Gospels and in Acts, he says:

The emphasis of the post resurrection narratives is on the most basic message of Easter: **God's new creation has begun**, and **Jesus' followers are its agents**, not just its beneficiaries. The stories don't say: "Jesus is raised, therefore we will be raised from the dead and go to heaven"; they say: "**Jesus is raised, therefore we have a job to do.**"

- **In our Gospel reading**, for example, **Mary Magdalen**, and the other women who first discovered the empty tomb. Once they had got over the shock of finding no body, and absorbing the information given them by an angel, what did they do? Shout alleluia? No. They had a job to do. Go and **tell** the disciples.

- In today's epistle **Peter** said: [Acts 10:41]

The risen Jesus was seen by witnesses whom God had already chosen. That is by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. [He gave us a job to do] He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

- **Paul** this time: [Rom 7:4]

So, my brothers, you belong to Christ who was raised from the dead, **in order that we might bear fruit to God.** You have a job to do.

Shouldn't our reaction should be the same. Both as individuals, and as a church? The resurrection gives us a job to do. To share the good news of Jesus, to bear spiritual fruit in our lives.

Richard, a few weeks back, reminded us that we have been saved in order to serve our neighbours.

"Jesus is raised, therefore we have a job to do."

