

## 20150315Lent4Sermon

Last week I spoke about God being transcendent and therefore inaccessible to us. But I also said that God was immanent and so our hunger for God can be satisfied. How? It is one thing to have a hunch that God exists but quite another to be persuaded that that hunch could become present in our lives.

Also last week I spoke about God becoming a human being and through this we can satisfy our hunger for God. God became human through the birth of Jesus Christ that we commemorate at Christmas which begins the process by being the opening chapter in the life of Christ – the God-man.

Only two gospels have birth narratives and they make it clear that there is something uniquely important about Mary's son. Luke says that he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and Matthew says that he is the fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, who will be called Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.

This idea of God with us, that God enters the world of human experience, is the essence of Christmas. It is, what we call, the incarnation. By the event of Christmas it is implied that although God might seem abstract and 'out there', in fact godliness can touch all our lives. More importantly it is saying God is for everyone, not just the privileged few.

The idea of 'God with us' is what Christianity calls the 'Incarnation' – the embodiment of God in human form. However, the idea that God enters the world in the form of a human being can seem very odd. How could the man Jesus be both human and divine? If God is an all knowing, all-powerful, timeless being, how could he possibly be contained in one limited human life? It doesn't make a lot of sense. But the Christians who wrote the creeds in the fourth and fifth centuries thought it was a crucial issue and spent a lot of energy trying to make a watertight case that Jesus was perfect God and perfect man.

For Liberal Christian the doctrine of the Incarnation is crucial to understanding Christianity. They are inclined to say simply that people recognised in Jesus a special god-revealing quality. This is also the angle taken by the gospel stories themselves. They tell of people who meet Jesus and find it such an overwhelming experience that they start asking themselves and each other what kind of person he is. Who is this who can forgive sins? Who is this who can heal the blind and the deaf? Or, when he stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, who is this that the winds and the waves obey him? The questions are not answered in the Gospels but the implication clear enough: **he is the Messiah** and at the climax of Mark's Gospel in the crucifixion story the centurion, who watched Jesus die, says, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' How did he come to this conclusion? This man was a soldier, not someone well read in philosophy and theology. But this soldier having seen the gracious way in which Jesus faced his execution was moved to believe.

And that is the key: the recognition of Jesus as the revealer of God is a response of faith. It is a response of faith that can make sense despite the barrage of intellectual objections offered by science. Philosophers might criticise the mythology-laden belief system of the ancient world as well the historical reliability of the texts and raise questions - the most familiar of which is the questioning of the virgin birth. Yet, despite these objections the moral character of Jesus has stridden across the pages of Western history and left a mark on our institutions and public life. The high proportion of people who say they believe in God would, I suspect, express that belief in terms of the moral character of Jesus.

Whatever your take is on the life of Jesus (and there are many different views) it inaugurated a tremendous spiritual momentum especially after the crucifixion and resurrection.

Christians say that without the resurrection there would be no Christianity. So, why is the resurrection that important? Although the hunger for God can be met by the life and teaching of Jesus, it is the extraordinary claim of Christianity that after his crucifixion and burial, Jesus rose from the dead, and as the living Christ energised the life of the Church. The resurrection is important because it is evidence that God's intervention in the world was effective. It affirms the sovereignty of God by proclaiming the triumph of Cross over evil and shows that Jesus' work is not defeated by the crucifixion, but strengthened in such a way as to provide hope to his followers and confidence in the future.

That is what it means to Christians, but inevitably people want to ask about the nature of the event of the resurrection. What actually happened? Are we expected to take it literally or symbolically and is the quality of our faith determined by how we answer that question?

Liberal Christianity is not the kind of religion that asks us to believe six impossible things before breakfast. With that in mind I find the accounts of the resurrection in the New Testament encouraging. The first chronologically speaking is in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Here he describes various appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples, culminating in a visionary appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road. These incidents imply that the experience of the risen Christ was spiritual rather than physical, which Paul actually argued for quite specifically in I Corinthians 15, where he said that when a person is buried their body 'is sown a physical body, and raised a spiritual body'.

This view is borne out to a certain degree by the gospels that were written later. When Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden, she doesn't immediately recognise him and thinks he is the gardener. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples who walk with him all day don't recognise him until he breaks bread with them at the evening meal. And when he appears to the disciples in a locked room, he appears and disappears like a vision. On the other hand, of course, there is a strong tradition that argues for his physical resurrection, especially the tradition of the empty tomb and the story of 'doubting Thomas' in which Thomas is asked to prove the resurrection for himself by touching the wounds of Jesus. However **you** interpret the resurrection, it is clear from the New Testament and from subsequent Christian reflection that it is not about resuscitation event in itself but about the mysterious ongoing life of Christ.

What actually happened on that first Easter morning is comparatively unimportant beside the surge of enthusiasm and admiration that grew up around the memory of Jesus. What makes people want to become Christians is not miraculous events but an irresistible admiration for Jesus' teachings and example.

The big issue at Easter is not the resurrection but the crucifixion - the fact that this good and innocent man, the Son of God, was deserted by his followers and died so graciously. The resurrection hope that followed was the inevitable consequence of this display of self-giving love and it is in that very graciousness that God's presence is perceived.

This is the point made by Mark's Gospel, which originally ended at Chapter 16 verse 8 without any resurrection account. The Good News for Mark was the godly life revealed in Jesus and recognised by Peter at Caesarea Philippi when he said, 'You are the Christ' - a judgement that was justified by Jesus' subsequent dignity in the face of death. By ending his gospel with the fear of the women who discovered the empty tomb, it is as if Mark were saying, if you haven't got the message in the story so far, you never will.

Christians normally say it is **Good** Friday because of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. I would like to put it the other way round as well - that the resurrection must have the crucifixion. There is a text from Lamentations which reads : 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.' Now, that is the key question because it's the one that asks if you care, or if you are moved by the suffering of Jesus. If a person doesn't care, or isn't moved by the self-giving love of Jesus, then the resurrection will mean nothing. How could it? It would be as kitsch as the Easter Eggs and Easter bunnies. But if one is moved by the Passion and you do care about it, then the resurrection is the inevitable consequence, because we have been changed and that is the impetus of the new life that the resurrection stories point to. It brings New beginnings.

So, Easter is about both crucifixion and resurrection. The dark side of our human personality and our human society comes out in the story of Jesus' death. Dark things such as : betrayal for money in the case of Judas, cowardice when Peter said he had never met Jesus, the institutional brutality of ritual execution with soldiers teasing the man they were paid to torture, and the callous indifference of the baying crowd shouting for blood. These events symbolise human evil and they need to come out. Then the light comes, on Easter Sunday morning and the symbol of the empty tomb. So we return to the coming of light with the incarnation – coming of the light of Christ into the world. We experience God touching our lives in an incarnational way (whether we are thinking literally or metaphorically) the effect, if it is genuine, will make us to live our lives differently.