

Christ has been raised

*A Sermon given by Nigel Guthrie at Holy Cross, Crediton on Easter Day, 4 April 2010.*

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. (1Cor 15:19)

We have come to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It sounds straightforward if we say it quickly! But the resurrection is one of those things which gets more complex the more you look into it. Today's gospel reading is a case in point. Mary didn't recognize Jesus when he first spoke to her. She only recognized him when he said her name. Often in the biblical accounts of the resurrection Jesus seems both different and the same as in his previous life. On one occasion he inexplicably appears in a locked room, but in another he eats some freshly cooked fish. One minute he is teaching his disciples as he is walking along and they have no idea who he is. The next moment he sits with them and breaks bread and they know him.

The resurrection is rightly called a mystery, meaning that it is beyond human knowledge to explain or to understand fully. Yet St Paul says confidently 'in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.' He then goes on to speak in poetry and imagery about the resurrection. 'What you sow does not come to life until it dies' he says referring to a seed having to dry out and fall to the ground before it can grow. 'Behold I tell you a mystery' Paul continues 'we will not all die but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed.' Paul writes with great drama about the resurrection, but he is also quite down to earth about the basics: 'in fact Christ has been raised from the dead'.

Why did St Paul believe the resurrection? Why should we believe the resurrection? Why does it matter, anyway? The best answer from a school pupil I have had recently to the question 'why do we celebrate Easter?' was 'So we can have chocolate'! I was obliged to point out that you don't to have Easter to have chocolate.

I think St Paul believed the resurrection for two reasons. Firstly he had seen the belief and witness of the early Christians, how they lived, the way they shared what they had, the hope and courage with which they faced persecution. We know that because Paul, before his conversion, was one of those doing the persecuting. And secondly he believed the resurrection because he had experienced Jesus for himself. On the road to Damascus he had literally a blinding vision of Jesus asking him why he was persecuting him. Paul had no doubt then that Jesus was alive. At that point Jesus had not only been raised from the dead but had also ascended into heaven, but Paul still experienced him very much alive.

So why should we believe the resurrection? Firstly we have the Bible. Some might say that the resurrection accounts were made up by people who wanted to believe that Jesus had risen. But to me they seem much too contradictory and peculiar for that to be true. In today's gospel reading, for instance, we have a woman being the first person to meet Jesus and take the news back to the other disciples. It would be most unusual in those times to have entrusted such crucial knowledge to a woman. And the accounts, as I was saying earlier, paint a varied and uncertain picture of what the risen Jesus was like. They sound very much to me like people struggling to put into words experiences they couldn't fully explain. In other words they sound authentic.

Secondly, we have the witness of other Christians. Paul was among the first Christians but we have nearly twenty centuries of Christians to bear witness to their belief in the resurrection. Many of them have been simple people, it is true. But all the same their faith strengthened and helped them and sometimes inspired them to do extraordinary things. And there have been others who have been among the greatest minds of their generations, people like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas whose immense knowledge and intellect didn't prevent them from believing in the resurrection. But perhaps it's more likely that we will have been influenced people closer to home who have shared the Christian faith, perhaps members of our own families or friends, in whom we have seen something to make us think that the Christian faith might be true, or at least that it might be worth looking into.

Thirdly, like Paul, we may have experienced Jesus alive ourselves, not necessarily in a dramatic vision but perhaps in a profound sense of guidance or blessing or peace or in some other experience.

It is St Paul, again, who wrote 'If Christ has not been raised then your faith is vain'. He clearly believed that it matters greatly whether the resurrection happened. But why does it matter so much? It matters because if Jesus died and was not raised then we have no hope of resurrection ourselves. We must accept that this life is all that there is and that we must simply make the best of it. But the Christian faith does not accept that. We say that we can only see the true meaning of this life within the light of eternity. It is eternity that puts our lives in their true perspective, not that they are unimportant because they are so small but, on the contrary, that they are of great importance to God because each of us is unique and has an eternal significance in God's purpose. It matters that we try to discover what we are here for.

And for Christians resurrection is not just about what happens to us after death, far from it. The resurrection shows us how to live life here and now, and it is not just a pattern for us as individuals but for us all together. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. The resurrection life here and now means living hopefully, looking for new life even in situations of suffering and tragedy, looking for forgiveness where there is hatred and trusting that God will bring some good out of bad situations. We are not here just to enjoy the resurrection but also to help it happen around us.

And finally the resurrection is vital because without it we would be worshipping a dead hero, not a living Saviour. There are plenty of dead heroes to choose from and it's good that they should be honoured. But to worship such a hero is dangerous and fruitless and roots us in the past. But to have a living Saviour opens up the possibility of a living and growing relationship. It is a living Saviour that has inspired so many to give up their lives to serve the poor and the sick, to educate children and work for peace. Easter shows us that Jesus is such a Saviour, one in whom we can trust, one to whom we can talk in prayer, one who is present with us through his Spirit. Without the reality of a living relationship with God the Christian faith would not have survived two generations let alone twenty centuries.

So to believe in the resurrection is not simply to accept an ancient story but to accept an invitation to a relationship and to an adventure which affirms our lives at every turn as valuable to God and to our fellow travellers.