

A sermon given at Holy Cross, Crediton on Easter Day 2013
by Prebendary Nigel Guthrie

I was never a great one for organized games at school. Indeed in the first week at my new school we were sent up to the playing fields but I dawdled when the teacher was trying to get us together to start a game and was given a detention before there had been any play. Not a promising start to my school sporting career. Needless to say I wasn't in any school teams and the ultimate insult was that those of us who weren't in the teams had to turn up on Saturday afternoons to cheer on the school's first fifteen. Perhaps it was meant to inspire us to greater efforts on the pitch or to increase the esprit de corps within the school. But it put me off watching organized sport for forty years. It has only been the last few years when I have accompanied my rugby playing son to watch the Exeter Chiefs that I've finally learned to enjoy the experience of cheering from the sidelines.

It was a few years after the sporting detention that I was invited to join the school choir, something I really enjoyed. Now I've never been a brilliant singer but that's one of the great things about being in a choir; you don't have to be a great soloist but you can still be part of a good performance. I still enjoy choral singing and, of course, I am still able to enjoy it some years after my contemporaries have had to retire from their competitive sports.

Many people enjoy watching sport, and listening to music, but my experience is that to participate is the most rewarding thing. Our minds and bodies can be completely absorbed in the game or the musical performance.

When we come to celebrate Easter, and the other great Christian festivals, there can be a tendency to come as observers, perhaps even supporters or audience. The music and readings, the flowers and the architecture all enrich our experience. But they are all here to point to something beyond themselves.

The collect or set prayer for Palm Sunday and the week that has just past prays 'grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility and also be made partakers of his resurrection.'

Now that's quite a thought. You were no doubt expecting to hear about the resurrection this morning and to sing some hymns about it and to celebrate it. But how about partaking in it? You may think that could be tricky as you really have to be dead to be resurrected! Now the resurrection is a mystery, in that Christians believe it without being able fully to explain it. But I would like to suggest two ways in which we can try to understand the resurrection and our part in it, two ways of partaking which are suggested by scripture and the words of our services.

The first way is to look at the service of Baptism and some words which often pull me up short as I say them. Especially with the baptism of a baby or young child there is a strong sense of thanksgiving for the safe arrival of this wonderful gift from God. But the priest says 'To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him'. That's strong stuff. But there is a part of us which needs to die; the part which is utterly selfish, the part that fails to notice the needs of others, the part which enjoys denigrating or mocking others, or which can even be cruel or abusive. Later in the baptism service the priest says 'bless this water that those who are washed in it may be made one with Christ in his death and resurrection, to be cleansed and delivered from all sin'. By confessing our shortcomings and looking for God's forgiveness and restoration we are already becoming partakers of the resurrection. We are acknowledging God's power to renew our lives.

And the second way I would like to suggest is to think of resurrection as something we are in together. Sometimes at the Peace we use words of Saint Paul 'We are the body of Christ, in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body'. I'm sure that we were baptized in many different churches but those of us who are baptized or christened were all blessed by the one Spirit of God and adopted as his children. In his writing about the body of Christ Paul makes clear that the body only works when its different parts all work together. Which brings me back to my opening; a sports team or a choir is no good with only one member. Indeed even if the team had one brilliant player but that player doesn't work with the other members it won't be an effective team. And a choir with one fabulous soloist won't be any good either because in a choir all the parts must sing together be balanced and in time, that's why they need to watch the conductor.

When God raised Jesus from the dead it was so that all people could be raised from the death of sin to new life. You may not have felt that enthusiastic about coming to church on this chilly morning when you've missed an hour's sleep but be assured that by doing so you have helped everyone else here to participate that bit more fully in the resurrection. Christ is risen in us together – Alleluia!

So on this day God invites us to bring ourselves to him, to hand over to him those illnesses, disappointments, family problems and weaknesses which drag us down, those things that make us feel half-dead. He invites us to lay them and to lay our shortcomings at his feet. When he raised Jesus from the dead he showed that no sin and no pain were so great that he could not defeat them. The resurrection shows that God will bring hope and healing and new life in this world and the next. (He will use us to do it). Prepare to be surprised. If there's one thing that comes through in all the accounts of the resurrection it is the surprise felt by the disciples. Yes, Jesus had told them that on the third day he would rise again, but surely he was speaking in some parable as he often did. Yet the disciples were deeply convinced by what they experienced in the resurrection. If they had not been convinced that Jesus was alive would their evident fear have been changed to the boldness and joy that resounds through the New Testament?

The early Christians gave up their lives to pass on the good news of the resurrection. They believed it would bring life and hope to future generations. We have met together today to celebrate that good news and to play our part in that continuing witness.