

## 328. Sunday 19th April, 2007, Second Sunday of Easter, Evening Communion, Saint Mary's

Lord, give your word now like rain and snow, that there may be seed for the sower and bread for the eater; that your word may accomplish that which you intend, and not return to you empty. Amen.

A recent survey on the meaning of Easter for the young suggested that many of them associated Easter with chocolate eggs. Well, like Rudolf Bultmann, whom I shall mention again later, I want to start this evening by demythologising chocolate. For however pleasant the taste of the long-chain lipids from cocoa beans may be, chocolate has no deep-seated relationship with the festival of Easter. This was brought home to me vividly on a recent visit to Belgium. Belgium being Belgium, the land of good food and bad taste, I noticed in a chocolate shop in Brugge that they had not just chocolate eggs, but also nude female figures and male genitalia, all available in plain, white or milk chocolate. But even real eggs, though an older tradition, have less to do with Easter than eating roast lamb with your overcoat on has to do with the Passover. Eggs are said to symbolise new life, which we celebrate at Easter, and a broken egg symbolises the breaking open of Jesus's rocky tomb, or so we are told. But the true Christian symbols of Easter are water and the cross.

This brings us to that part of our New Testament reading that I want to use as a text:

*Ac 5: 30-31 "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree, and exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour".*

If you belong to the 'reductionist' school of thought, you will be reasonably happy with this reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The

phrases *raising up and exalting Jesus* are quite comfortable for those who think with Rudolf Bultmann that the resurrection was a non-event, constructed by believers after Jesus's crucifixion as the first step to his being deified. Bultmann was a German theologian who maintained that the message of the gospel had been obscured for people of the twentieth century by the mythology which surrounds the Gospel stories. His theological approach was to demythologise the Gospels. But the author of Acts did not put into Peter's mouth any words in this passage that make any implications about what happened after Jesus's body was taken down from the cross. The view shared by many persons from Muslims to Jehovah's Witnesses, that Jesus was a great prophet but also a mere man, would fit quite well with this reading from Acts.

Very different however, is our gospel reading. After Bultmann had finished with the Fourth Gospel, there would not be much about the resurrection left. Here we have a Jesus who can enter a room through locked doors, who has wounds and scars on his hands, feet and side. This is all very puzzling and anomalous. If the body of Jesus had healed at a miraculous rate, such a body would not be able to enter a locked room like a character in a mystery novel. But if the body of Jesus was not a physical one, why did it bear wounds?

Attempts to explain the resurrection stories are not going to work. Nor is asking the question *What really happened on the cross and why?* going to get us very far on our Christian pilgrimage. The fact remains that according to the New Testament, a significant number of people (more than 500 according to Paul) saw what they came to realize was the risen Jesus, and they, the eye witnesses, had no doubt that he was alive and had been exalted by the Father to a throne in heaven. We have no such an eyewitness experience, but our situation is dealt with in Jesus's discussion with Thomas. Thomas wanted to see Jesus in order to believe. He was lucky. He got his wish. Subsequent generations have not

been as lucky as Thomas. But that is no impediment to belief. Not many years after this, the author of the first letter of Peter was writing: "Although you have not seen Jesus, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." (1 Pet 1. 8).

Belief is about two things: repentance and acceptance of God in Jesus Christ. We need no scripture to repent, turning away from sin is what makes a person moral. The anti-social behaviour that we see among the young stems from having been brought up without morality. In baptism we repudiate that, and turn to God. Repentance may make us moral, but it does not make us Christians. Being a Christian means accepting the love of God manifested in his son Jesus, who had become man for our sake, who died to take away our sins. The evidence for Christianity is twofold: scripture and the experience of others. The Fourth Gospel was compiled with that very intention. The final verse of our reading tonight shows the intention of the author:

*"These signs are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name".*

So the indescribable joy of Easter obliges us to go forth and tell the world of God's love in the triumph of his Son over death, a triumph in which we share. And in so doing, we are not going to quote scripture at our fellow human beings. We have in our own hearts the conviction that Jesus is alive and reigns from our own personal experience of his love. Just as the Jews at this time of the year celebrated their liberation from the slavery of Egypt and the mercy of a God that protected their eldest children from death, so Christians go out to proclaim the love of a God who has delivered us from the slavery of sin and immorality and raised us

with his Son to a new life in him.

The need for us to do this has never been stronger. The young people growing up today are more in need of a Saviour than those of us who enjoyed a Christian upbringing. The legal system attempts to impose morality by threatening people with dire punishment for their wrong behaviour. But this clearly does not work. The punishment is not dire enough. But with full prisons and a climate of permissiveness, negative retaliation is never going to be successful. Only a positive message about turning away from sin can achieve repentance. But getting such a message across to a generation that worships money, possessions and feeling good, with no thought for the future or of other people, is very hard work for us. Only God can give us, via this sacrament of the altar, the strength we need to proclaim his life-giving power to bring back even the most hardened self-oriented individual to the love of his or her fellow human beings and of God.

**TO RETURN TO SERMONS PAGE:**

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