

Sermon – Easter 3 2021

The resurrection appearances of Jesus dominate the gospel readings during the season of Easter. Just in case, with the passage of time, we are becoming less convinced of the truth of the extraordinary events of Easter morning, we are being reminded that Jesus rose from the dead, not simply as an apparition, but as a fully whole and complete human being capable of being touched and even sharing a meal with his friends.

The eucharistic nature of the appearance of Jesus in this morning's gospel reading – sharing a simple meal of broiled fish - is a central part of the disciples' encounter with the risen Christ and will be echoed in our post communion prayer at the end of the service.

Another theme in the gospel, also reflected in our reading from Acts, is the lengths that Luke – who authored both books of course – went to explain Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish expectations of the Messiah.

Peter, in our first reading, does so immediately after healing a lame man. Jesus, of course, does so in the light of his own miracle. If you doubt the miracles, suggests Luke, look to the evidence of history and then believe.

My reflections this morning though, begin at the start of the gospel passage. The disciples are chatting amongst themselves about the experience of Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. We know that, because that is the passage that immediately precedes this one in Luke.

Jesus' appearance seems to be directly related to this conversation – perhaps doubts are being cast upon the genuineness of the Emmaus road events. One can imagine the frustration of Cleopas and his friend in having their experiences questioned.

So, Jesus appears and utters the words with which the disciples are already very familiar from two previous resurrection experiences: *Peace be with you*. Rather than being reassured and comforted by hearing something they've already heard from the lips of the risen Jesus, their response is one of sheer terror.

Physical presence proves insufficient for the disciples to truly believe. Jesus has to go on and demonstrate the truth of the resurrection is four different ways:

First, he shows the disciples his wounds;

Second, he invites the disciples to touch him;

Third, he eats in their presence;

Finally, he turns to Jewish history and scripture.

Sight, touch, taste, hearing.

It's as if Jesus is saying, believe in with me with all your senses, with the whole of your selves: you shall, after all, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind...

If you struggle with belief, faith, in the physical resurrection, then you are in good company. If the disciples who lived alongside Jesus for three years struggled with the manifestation of the physically risen Christ, then we really shouldn't be surprised when we struggle with it, without all the advantages presented to those early followers of Jesus. It is, quite simply, an odd idea.

Yet, it becomes so much less odd after Pentecost, after we are blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third dimension of the Living God. Then, the resurrection makes a great deal more sense as we come to understand, see and experience the presence of Christ in ourselves and in others. Then we don't have to get our heads around

a physical resurrection at all, and can continue, quite comfortable, in the presence of the Spirit of Christ.

I am quite content to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus without extrapolating from that to a belief in the physical resurrection of all people in the fullness of time. As with a lot of theology and doctrine, I tend to stand aside from nuanced arguments and follow a simpler faith of acceptance on trust. It might sound like a bit of a cop out, but I'm much more interested in the impact of faith on me and others, than the impact of doctrine. In my view, too much doctrine tends to lead to too many rules, and the only rules we really have to follow are to love God and to love one another.

Which brings me on to the five words that strike me as amongst the most important in the gospel reading and which are reflected in Peter's great speech in Acts too. "You are witnesses of these things."

Soon after I was old enough to be admitted, I used to take myself off to the Old Bailey and sit in the public gallery. I loved the panelled environment, the austerity, the seriousness of the events – however, banal the case. The place has presence. I would have loved to have been a barrister if my educational opportunities had been different.

As a youngster all the paraphernalia of a courtroom fascinated me – but so did the witnesses. Here were people – some of them voluntarily – testifying to the events they had seen or heard. They wanted to tell their story; whether out of duty, love, obligation, their inner moral compass – whatever their motivation, they wanted to tell their story...

This is the role that Jesus is imploring his disciples to fulfil; this is what the resurrection appearances are designed to achieve; this is what Jesus wants each of us to take from these events immediately following his death.

Tell your faith story, so that others too might come to believe.

It is never too late to tell your story, and the story of faith in your life, might be of enormous help to a younger generation. Perhaps you've never told your faith story before? Perhaps you wouldn't know where to start.

I wonder if there is an idea here worth exploring. If stories interest you, perhaps you would be willing to sit down with someone from your congregation and listen to their faith story. Perhaps we could record them – begin our own little version of the BCC's fabulous 'Listening Project'.

Capturing our faith stories might be one way of helping younger generations come to faith; they might even prove pivotal in restoring faith in the church for another generation.

Have a think; chat about it with others; let me know if you'd be willing to give it a try. I can certainly help, but this is an idea for you; for you are the witnesses, one to another, just like the first disciples.

Amen.

