

B – Easter Day

Isa 25.6-9 'we have waited for him, so that he might save us'

Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24

1 Cor 15.1-11 'I handed on to you as of first importance what I had received'

Mk 16.1-8 'He has been raised'

Resurrection is news!

It isn't advice. It isn't a theory. It isn't philosophy. It isn't a new religion. It is news.

Something happened that people needed to know.

So in Mark's gospel, when the women arrive at the tomb at sunrise they are told, 'you are looking for Jesus... who was crucified. He has been raised; ... go, tell his disciples.' (Mark 16.6-7). News!

In John's account of that morning, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. She encounters the risen Jesus, whom she at first mistakes for the gardener. Jesus speaks to her then she went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and told them what Jesus had said (John 20.11-18). News!

In his letter to the church at Corinth Paul says 'I remind you ... of the ... news that I proclaimed to you ... that Christ died ...that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day ...' (1 Cor. 15.1, 3-5). News!

What sense would this news have made to its first hearers in the first century? What meaning would they have attached to it?

Well, they would have come to grips with it in terms of their own world view and expectations. For centuries and centuries the great dream of Israel was that the creator God would deal with the issues in their world and put to rights everything that was wrong. Things were not as they were meant to be. There was destruction and inhumanity and injustice and oppression everywhere. Israel had been dominated by one pagan nation after another, for hundreds of years, the last of them being Rome. They struggled to hold onto the dream that God would act, that world history would be brought to a climax and that God would renew creation.

Mark wrote his gospel to say 'It has happened. God has acted. World history has reached it's climax and the new creation has begun.' It's clinched by the resurrection. That's why resurrection happens on the first day of the week. It's the beginning of the new creation like the first creation in Genesis where God

began 'On the first day'. So to people who thought and spoke and wrote as they did, this is what the news would have meant.

But what about us? What does the news mean in our context? We live in a modern and post-modern world on the other side of the enlightenment. We like to think of ourselves as being light years away from the ignorance and superstition and naiveté of our fairy-tale believing first century forebears. Unlike them we know that dead people don't rise again.

In actual fact, they had a pretty fair idea that that was the case too. It wasn't everyday they ran into people who had died and come back again. They knew, just as well as we do, that dead people stay dead. That's why, when one person was raised from the dead it was such shocking news.

In our day, though, we've pushed resurrection out of sight. Instead of it being about the recreation of the earth and human society being put to rights, we've turned it into an other worldly concern to do with going to heaven when you die.

Heaven is a place we imagine to be away somewhere. We try not to picture it in crude terms as being above the sky, because we know that's childish, but we're not quite sure how to picture it. It's a kind of home for disembodied souls or spirits who've been freed from their limiting bodies and escaped from this dismal earthly life.

We don't recognize that this kind of thinking owes more to Greek philosophy and a Platonic world-view, than it does to Jewish and Christian understandings. We've unknowingly imbibed a kind of dualism that sees material, earthly life as inferior to a spiritual, disembodied, heavenly life. You see that in some religious songs and hymns:

This world is not my home, I'm just 'a passin' through
My treasure is laid up, somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore!

But that's not the Christian understanding. The Christian view doesn't see this life as something to escape from, that the material world is bad, that real existence is a spiritual one divorced from this world. That kind of thinking leads to abandoning the earth to its dismal fate because the material world, in the end, doesn't matter. What matters is life in a remote heaven. So there's no need to worry about acid rain or global warming or carbon emissions or salination or water use for example.

And sometimes biblical material is used to back up views like this. Like the phrase in Philippians which says that 'our citizenship is in heaven'. Some take

that to mean don't worry about this world too much, we're on our way out of here. But that's not the point at all. Paul is drawing an analogy from what it means to be a citizen of the Roman empire while living in an outpost of the empire in a place like Philippi. The last thing in the world Rome wanted was to have all the Roman citizens in Philippi go home to Rome. Rome couldn't possibly have coped if all the citizens of the empire tried to go Rome. The point of the parallel is to say that Roman citizens, wherever they are in the empire, are expected to spread Roman civilization into those regions. The goal was to colonise the places beyond Rome with Roman civilization. So the point of affirming that we are citizens of heaven is not that we need to escape from the earth but that we're expected to colonise that part of the earth where we are with the civilisation of heaven.

The NT pictures the end not as us going up to heaven, but a new Jerusalem coming out of heaven (Rev 21.2) because the home of God is among mortals. It's a picture of the transformation of the whole creation, the world renewed, freed from imperfections. Heaven and earth become one.

So the Church isn't on about saving people from a nasty earth, escaping from a tainted creation to somewhere else. The church is about getting people involved in the new creation God is bringing about and which has already begun. We're on about sharing in the new creation now and helping to bring it to birth in the world now: implementing the resurrection, if you like.

Resurrection means creation matters and what we do matters. We take creation seriously because God does. It means that acid rain and global warming and salination and water conservation matter. It means that affluenza and poverty and the millennium development goals matter. Because God is renewing the created world and we are called to share in that project. It means that personal and corporate ethics matter. It means that sexual ethics matter. Because each of our lives and each of our communities is meant to be a place where heaven and earth intersect. What we do to support the people of Innisfail in the wake of cyclone Larry matters. Making peace in our world matters. Finding alternatives to armed conflict matters. Dialogue and understanding and compassion and care matter. This earth is shot through with glimpses and first tastes of heaven.

The new creation, heavenly life, if you like, has begun. Heaven is not in outer space. Heaven is not far away at all. Heaven and earth interpenetrate each other, they overlap, they interlock. The curtain between heaven and earth runs through every room. It's a thin curtain. And now and again it blows aside and we find heaven bursting out among us. It's a taste of what God is doing and will do.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest and poet, captured it:

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

...

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is smeared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: ...

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

...

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Resurrection means that even though the world is 'bleared and smeared ... and wears man's smudge' 'for all this ... there lives the dearest freshness ... because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings'. God's grandeur flames out. The new creation is being brought to birth.

That is resurrection. That is news. Good news.

Amen