

Christianity is all about Easter, and Easter is all about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey once put it so succinctly, 'No resurrection, no Christianity.' If the Easter event not happened, there would be no Gospel or New Testament; there would be no Christian faith or people; there would be nothing for us to celebrate today. There would be no church for us to come to. And any memory of a remarkable man called Jesus of Nazareth would have died within a few years of his tragic death.

Yet to account for this life-changing Easter event is difficult. Even the Gospels struggle to put the central event of our faith into words. In fact, they do not really explain it at all. Rather it is Easter, the resurrection, that explains the Gospels, why they were written. Everything we read about Jesus is interpreted from the perspective or through the lens of what happened at Easter. But the resurrection itself is by its very nature a mystery. The New Testament use of language makes that clear. The disciples *saw* the risen Lord, but how they did was entirely due to the initiative, the grace of God. God enabled Jesus to be seen by them.

The accounts of the resurrection of Jesus are not presented as proofs of life after death, or life after life as we prefer to name it. The disciples already believed in resurrection. All the Jews believed it, except for that strange sect called the Sadducees. As I once heard a preacher say, 'that is why they were sad, you see!'

Also, if Jesus was the incarnate Son of God already in his lifetime on earth, that God was active in him through his ministry and was with him at his death, then we may agree that resurrection was a forgone conclusion.

The disciples were overjoyed because after what had happened on that bleak Friday, when they had seen their master cruelly slain, they were able to see him in his risen form; he communicated with them; he reassured them. The experience was unique to them and to no one else. If photography had been possible in those days and someone had taken a photograph of the disciples when the risen Lord appeared to them, presumably he would not have appeared in the picture.

Our second reading today is the earliest written testimony of the resurrection. It comes not from a Gospel but from a letter of St Paul. The details Paul gives are what he himself had previously received. Presumably that was at the time of his conversion some 20 years earlier, and that takes us back to within

perhaps just three or four years of the resurrection event itself. So this passage is extremely important early testimony to the first resurrection experiences.

Paul does not seem to know, or certainly does not pass on, any details except the list of resurrection appearances to the apostles and others. Then he includes himself as one who has also seen the risen Lord. He is referring to his Damascus Road encounter. Again, it is an event that only he experiences, not those with him, other than perhaps being aware that something remarkable was happening to Saul, as he was called then, some audible or visionary experience that made him lose his sight for a while, as we read in the three accounts in book of Acts and his own written testimony in his letter to the Galatians.

Whatever the exact nature of the encounters experienced by the disciples and Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was of such great impact that their lives, lifestyles and deeply engrained Jewish religion were completely transformed. They no longer understood God apart from Jesus. The first day of the week, the day of resurrection, became their new holy day. They lived without fear of what might happen to them as they proclaimed Jesus Christ and his gospel of the kingdom of God. In the harsh political climate of the day, the Roman Empire, these brave men and women proclaimed quite publicly that the honour and titles given to Caesar, the emperor, as the Son of God, the Saviour of the World, the bringer of Peace on earth were not due to Caesar at all but to Jesus the Christ. Christianity was a peaceful movement but also politically subversive, offering a radically different vision for life on earth than the power systems of the time (and our own time too). It simply could not have started or survived let alone continue to grow without the driving force of the Easter event.

Our Lord's resurrection is the 'first fruits' of our own. Easter assures us that by living in Christ who is risen also gives us an eternal destiny. But we must park that assurance for now. Our primary focus as followers of Jesus is to be the same as his. It is this life, this world. Jesus' resurrection served to commission and empower his disciples for life and mission on this earth. The new life we enjoy in Christ has to be lived out, practised here and now in our daily lives. The risen Lord has made us part of a community through which he can remain visible in the world. We have been called to be community, Church, the family of God in Christ commissioned to work together to build the worldwide kingdom of God that Jesus began. The risen Lord appeared to his disciples

mostly when they were together. And it is together, through our worship and fellowship that the risen Lord is most present to communicate with us.

Peter says in our first reading that he and the other disciples ate and drank with the Lord after he had risen from the dead. That is exactly what we are doing today. We see and receive the risen Lord in the sacramental form that he has given for us to meet him, the bread and wine of the Eucharist. When we leave church today and any day that we have come together for the breaking of bread, we can declare with Mary Magdalene when she gave the news of the resurrection to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord!'

As we strive to live the Christian life we need each other, perhaps now more than at any time. Because we live out our faith in difficult times. We minister to difficult times. Our increasingly secular culture does not understand us, is sometimes hostile, and hopes to make us irrelevant. It is in and to that world that we serve. The most valuable gift we have to offer is love. The first Christians drew the admiration of the society around them because of their love for one another and for all. Christian mission is effective when Christian lives are authentic and reflect the light of the risen Christ. Those of us who have been enlightened or 'Christ-ened' have been set apart to show Christ to the world. We are the body of Christ on earth now. He has no other. Through our celebration of this great festival, may the risen Lord encourage and refresh us for the loving and reconciling work he has called us all to share with him. And may our Easter joy remain with us in the days ahead, and throughout our lives.