

Easter Day, Year A, 2022

Acts 10.34-43, John 20.1-18, Easter Anthems

Over the last weeks and months we at Christ Church have been hearing and considering a great deal of the material in John's gospel. For the benefit of those who haven't been on this journey I want to retrace quickly the stations we have made beginning with the Wedding in Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine, to being with Mary, the mother of Jesus, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, as well as John at the foot of the cross, the instrument of his death. Other stations in order involved overhearing a conversation about being born again between a leader amongst the Jews, Nicodemus, and Jesus, during which Nicodemus asks with incredulity, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Implying that Jesus is talking a load of nonsense. We then made our way with Jesus to a well in a town in Samaria where the woman Jesus meets asks, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' The evangelist is compelled to comment on just how unusual the encounter with the woman is by adding, 'Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.' We have been in the vicinity of the Temple in Jerusalem, where a man born blind is given sight by Jesus healing him on the Sabbath that the works of God might be revealed in him. The man testifies to those enquiring of him that Jesus is a prophet and he will go on to testify that Jesus is the Son of Man. Then only two weeks ago we heard of how Jesus raised Lazarus, his friend, not so much as a good deed, but to show that he is the Lord of life and the Lord over death, the lord of living and the dead. Only two days ago we were with Jesus in the garden where he was arrested. On Good Friday we witnessed the trials of the High Priest and of Pilate to make our way with him through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha, the place of the skull, the place of his death by crucifixion, a place of utter darkness.

Just now we have been with Mary, while it was still dark, at the tomb. We are not told why she went to the tomb. It wasn't in John's telling 'of a story most wonderful' to complete the rites of burial. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had already seen to this. We assume she went to mourn. To be close to the earthly remains of Jesus. Someone she loved. Someone she was devoted to. Someone she followed. What follows is her confusion by what she encounters. She sees that the stone that had been rolled in front of the tomb has been removed. Notice the change of pace that occurs. Mary makes her way to the tomb in the dark on the first day of the week. Her reaction on seeing the tomb open and empty is to run to Peter and the other disciple, who is not named. To tell them that these no goods could not even leave his body to rest in peace. And we know how important it is in the Middle East, but also in our own culture for the corpse of a loved one to be properly laid to rest.

The other disciple we assume is the beloved disciple. Together he and Peter run to the tomb. Their responses on reaching the tomb are different. The other disciple outruns Peter, but does not immediately enter, whereas Peter has no such qualms. He enters immediately. But it is the other disciple who seeing what Peter has already seen believes. The Evangelist puts it starkly when he states simply he saw and believed. What did he believe? The text doesn't help us as John comments 'they did not yet understand the scripture that he must first rise from the dead.' That is why there is so much perplexity even confusion.

Mary in the meantime has also returned to the tomb, while Peter and the other disciple return to their homes... And they will in time return to Galilee. There they will take up their former lives for a time as fishermen. Once they leave Jerusalem, they will not be the same. They will be forever changed. Think of what they have experienced some of which I have chronicled above. And if we read on just a little in John's gospel we would read how the Risen Christ, Jesus, comes to them in the evening of the first

day of the week, the same day, this Easter Day and breathes on them telling them that the sins that they forgive in his name are forgiven.

Over the last weeks I have been accompanying people young and not so young, but not as old as myself, who are at different stages of their walk with God. Some will be baptised as adults. Others will confirm their baptismal vows and be confirmed. In June both will be baptised and/or confirmed by the former Bishop of London, Lord Chartres and others will be received. The book I am asking them to read is called 'This is our Faith - a popular presentation of Christian belief'. I was struck rereading this book, not a weighty tome, by what Josephus, a Jewish historian, allegedly writes about Jesus in 66 AD (leaving aside for moment the textual difficulties). The quoted text leaves today's reader with an impression of just how baffling Jesus' appearing was to Jewish believers and others at the time.

'It was at that time a man appeared - if 'man' is the right word - who had all the attributes of a man but seems to be something greater. His actions were superhuman for he worked such wonderful and amazing miracles that I for one cannot regard him as a man: yet in view of his likeness to ourselves I cannot regard him as an angel either.'
(page 23)

Here Josephus is someone who cannot make up his mind about Jesus. He is puzzled. He won't easily come down on one side or the other. In my mind to his credit. As a historian does he require more evidence? How much evidence might he require if that's the case? Can there ever be enough evidence to be satisfied? As one person on being told by someone he looked up to that they found Jesus began studying the life of Jesus for himself coming to the conclusion that this was the dumbest thing or the most important thing. The latter 'the most important thing' is precisely where we sit as Christians. We who are gathered here on Easter Day for the most part believe just that. That it is the most important thing. Some hold this rather lightly, others non consequentially, meaning it makes no difference to their lives. But others will give their lives for this truth.

John's telling of the story 'O so divine' does not lose anything of the mystery of God made man. God in Jesus on the cross. God in Jesus laid in a tomb. God in Jesus raised. John's telling achieves something remarkable. Not only does he tell of God in Jesus, but he does so in a way that does not allow us to tie him down. We cannot own him. We cannot make him ours, although he can and does make us his.

Let me return to the other disciple. I warm to this disciple who in his hastiness on seeing the tomb empty believes. As we noted earlier this observation is followed up immediately by John's comment, 'They did not yet understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.' So what did this disciple believe given he didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must be raised? Why do I warm to this moment, so often heard and often overlooked. I warm to it because it rings true. We want to believe and we do believe, but how can we do this well, if we do not know the scriptures? If we do not understand the scriptures. But there is an even deeper reality to be acknowledged. We can never fully comprehend what we believe and what it is precisely that moves us from unbelief to belief, again and again, because the subject of our believing is God. It is a phenomenon we can trace in ourselves, but also in others. The outline of my faith has changed and will change, although the fundamentals remain the same. Faith needs to be held openly as 'open to the heavens'. At one and the same time God is knowable because God makes himself known and is unknowable because God is beyond our comprehension. God in the fullness of his glory remains for mortals elusive, 'a thing most wonderful'. As God says to Moses in the Burning Bush, You want to know my name? My name is 'I am who I am. I will be, who I will be.'

John's telling of the story of Jesus is marked throughout by contrasts. We noted one above. Mary Magdalene walking to the tomb and running back to tell the disciples. There is the contrast between the two disciples and their reactions. There is the

contrast between the darkness of the cross and the light of the new day, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, the eighth day. There is the contrast between the darkness that comes with the impact of the death of a loved one, especially of someone with whom we have shared our lives with for 25 years, 40 years, 50 years or only three and the light that floods us when we realise with Mary Magdalene that we are known by God by name. When we realise that death has been vanquished. Death now is where thy sting? It is a tradition at Easter to tell jokes, because on Easter Day we can wholeheartedly laugh at death, the last enemy as Paul writes, in the face.

There is the contrast between the tomb and the garden in which the tomb is set. A tomb is a lifeless place. A garden is a place of life, of vitality, of growth and if tended a place of beauty and re-creation. A garden requires a gardener. The gardener that Mary Magdalene encounters is the one who says in the beginning, 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' (Genesis 1.31a) We are grateful that Mary Magdalene thought Jesus to be the gardener, the clue she unknowingly gives us, because she is right. Jesus is the gardener, in the fullest sense of the word. 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' Because of Easter Day, because he is risen, because of this new day, we can sing alleluia, alleluia, alleluia over and over again. How do we sing? We sing with joy in our hearts! And there was evening and there was morning, the eighth day, our Easter Day, the Day of Resurrection. This first day of the week, this day of resurrection is the eighth day. And it is good! It is very good! No longer does sin have dominion over us and no longer does death have the last word, but through God's re-creation, we live to God in the sure hope of eternal life. This is indeed something stupendous. It shakes the foundations like an earthquake.

Drawing to a close I quote the great theologian of the Church Paul,

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

How shall we sing our alleluias? One of Easter our hymns sung to the tune in English
'The Light of the Morning Star' gives direction.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Hearts to heaven and voices raise;
sing to God a hymn of gladness,
sing to God a hymn of praise:
he who on the cross a victim
for the world's salvation bled,
Jesus Christ, the King of glory,
now is risen from the dead.

Gott sei Dank! Deo gratias! Thanks be to God. Amen.