

Easter Day Evensong 2019 (21.04.19)

Isaiah 43: 1 – 21; 1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11

Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, but today is Easter Day. We don't get a narrative account of the Resurrection at Evensong - you have to come to a Communion service for that – but what we do have is St Paul in 1 Corinthians proclaiming the saving grace of God through Jesus which climaxes in the Resurrection. And he is adamant that you've got to insist on the Resurrection. You're selling the story short if you overlook it.

There's been a meme going round Facebook for the last few days. Some quiet high profile Christians have been posting it and then I've seen it shared on the timelines of people I know. It says "My entire theology can be condensed into four words: Jesus died for me." Actually, I think that's an inadequate theology. I believe it completely. It is my theology. Let me proclaim it: I believe that Jesus died for me. But it's

not my entire theology. Because on its own it doesn't actually get us very far. All sorts of people have died for others. They're heroes. They're martyrs. Their sacrifice fills you with admiration and wonder for the altruism that's hard wired into human nature. But no matter how remarkable their selflessness may have been, it doesn't have cosmic significance.

Whereas, on the other hand, the death of Jesus does have cosmic significance. And it has cosmic significance because he didn't just die for us. It has cosmic significance because he died for us *and was raised on the third day for us* in accordance with the scriptures. What translates an admittedly fine, noble gesture into something of a completely different order; into something that reconfigures our entire frame of reference by which we determine what *is* reality and what's *not* reality; is the combination of death and resurrection.

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And that's because that combination is the fulfilment of the ultimate yearning within human nature which is poured out in the scriptures by Isaiah piling up hyperbole upon hyperbole. Isaiah simply knows that there is a promise held out to us when things will just be a right as right can be. And he can't fit enough images onto the page to describe, to try to put into words, what he's trying to get at. It will be as amazing as walking through fire and not being burned; as amazing as walking under water and not drowning; as amazing as deaf people being able to hear; or blind people being able to see; or . . . or . . . or . . . whatever! And this is it! The death and resurrection of Jesus is the real thing, the reality that constitutes all that human beings can possibly yearn for to the point that human vocabulary is inadequate to express it. So we shout Alleluia!

And then we see on our news feeds that 200 people have been massacred in churches and hotels this morning in Sri Lanka; that President Trump is

refusing to withdraw his support from the Saudi-imposed humanitarian crisis in Yemen; that there seems to be every likelihood of forthcoming elections in this country being dominated by xenophobic populists sowing the seeds of mistrust and division. And after all that we need to face up to our personal peccadillos and brokenness and pain.

So what price Alleluia? Is it all utopian nonsense? Does the Resurrection offer no more than a pipe dream? No it doesn't! And it doesn't because, just as the four words "Jesus died for me" fail to sum up my theology adequately, so the Resurrection fails to sum up my theology adequately. The Resurrection is not utopian nonsense; it's not a pipe dream because it is always combined with the reality of the crucifixion. It takes into account and takes seriously the darkness of human reality.

If you read utopian fiction it is just naïve twaddle. William Morris' "News from Nowhere" I found deeply

dissatisfying. I recently read Keir Hardie's "From Serfdom to Socialism." It's meant to be one of the foundational pieces of literature of the Labour movement. It's naïve twaddle. The argument seems to be that we'll wave a magic wand and everybody will be nice to each other. But they won't. Because people aren't nice. They're selfish and cruel, whether you wave a magic wand or not. The Resurrection doesn't deny that. It always takes human failure, greed, selfishness, cruelty into account; because it is always tied to and combined with crucifixion.

Utopia can't exist. In fact the etymology, the historical root of the word comes from two Greek words: *ou* meaning no and *topia* meaning place. It literally means "no place." It can't exist because there can't possibly be any place on earth where there is no human failure and no suffering. But resurrection exists in this very place here and now. Because resurrection accepts, takes on itself and comes out of reality of human failure and suffering: it comes out of

crucifixion. And so it starts now. It doesn't have to wait for a time in human history when there is no more cruelty or suffering. That future has already arrived. We can know it now; and we can start participating in it now, doggedly insisting that the Resurrection is the framework wherein we will find our reality. But we can't do that if we insist on keeping Jesus dead for us.

Bill Vanstone's poem "Joseph of Arimathea's Easter" sums it up.

"He's gone," says Joseph, and, with Pilate's leave
Eases the nails and lowers him from the Tree,
Wraps him in reverent and tender thoughts
And lays him in the cave called Memory.

That cave is deeply hewn in Joseph's heart:
All that's within will always be his own:
In memory's cave the treasure of his past
Is safe for ever, walled and sealed by stone.

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“He’s safe,” says Joseph, “safe in this cool place
And no one now can take my Lord away.
In years to come I’ll still see his dear face
As clearly as I’ve seen it on this day.”

“He’s gone!” cries Joseph at the empty tomb:
But Mary says, “He’s left a word for you:
He cannot rest content to be your past,
So he has risen to be your future too.”

Amen.