

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2019 (12.05.19)

Choral Evensong

Isaiah 63: 7 – 14; Luke 24: 36 – 49

So: another Sunday in Easter, another resurrection appearance. This time it's – the last time in Luke's Gospel – it's to the disciples as they are gathered in Jerusalem and the two who have met Jesus on the road to Emmaus are telling the others what they've seen. I make no apology for the fact that it is yet another resurrection appearance if only because it serves to reinforce the point, that I lose no opportunity to labour, that Easter is not just an event: it's a season. We are still celebrating Easter. Just as Lent was a season of 40 days preceding, leading up to and helping us to prepare for Easter, so Eastertide is a season of 40 days helping us celebrate, reflect on and get our heads around the resurrection.

This resurrection appearance tells us quite a few things. The first is that what the Bible attests to is a

physical resurrection. This is no mere ghost, no apparition, no sensation or mere spiritual experience that seemed so real it was like actually meeting Jesus. There is emphasis and re-emphasis that this is the appearance of a real body with real bodily functions. It is flesh and bones that can be touched and felt; and it needs to eat.

The second thing is that the resurrected Christ is a wounded Christ. This person who appears to the disciples demonstrates he is Jesus by showing them his hands and his feet. It's a bit like Thomas in John's gospel who says "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put . . . my hand in his side, I will not believe." And when Jesus appears to him he invites him to do precisely that. So here, too, the implication is that Jesus is showing the disciples the wounds of the nails in his hands and his feet.

The resurrection is not a magic trick that reverses the crucifixion. The risen Christ is the Christ who was

crucified. And he still carries the marks of that crucifixion. Accepting the resurrection life for ourselves does not wipe out our past. It does not rewrite history. It renews our life so that we are able to endure all the brokenness and pain and regret we bring to the foot of the cross.

And the third thing Jesus does in this resurrection appearance is prepare the disciples to be commissioned for their world-wide evangelism. The so-called Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel is a commission to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is similar, but it's not about what is to be done: it's about what is to be said: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations."

That nuanced difference is something I don't find too congenial. It's not my style, not in my disposition, not my theological tradition to be thundering hell-fire and

damnation from the pulpit, denouncing people as sinners and calling them to repentance. And it opens up that hoary chestnut of whether forgiveness requires there to have been repentance; whether it's necessary to bring someone to the crisis of the conviction of sin before they can be forgiven; or whether we can just say that God loves everybody, full stop and have done with it.

People who did the Priory's Lent course, following the TV series *Broken* written by Jimmy McGovern, may have some prior experience of trying to get their heads round this, or at least if they'd been following my notes they would. If you look to the Bible you can find examples that will back you up whichever side of the argument you want to take.

- Jesus tells a paralysed man who's been carried in on a stretcher that his sins are forgiven without he man saying a word: we're told it was because

Jesus saw the faith of the people who carried him in.¹

- But, when telling disciples to forgive each other, he says “if there is repentance, you must forgive.”²
- And you can stack them up, quote against quote on either side of the argument.

What people who insist on the necessity of repentance say - and I'm going to use a big word now – is that passages like this evening's are paradigmatic: they create a paradigm, an overarching framework. There may be examples of forgiveness not being preceded by repentance, but they sit within in overall system of faith which follows the pattern: repent, receive forgiveness, enter into the life of faith. In the opening chapter of Mark, the very first time we hear of Jesus saying anything it is that he was “proclaiming the good news of God, and saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in

the good news.” Right in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter is getting into his stride preaching, what he preaches is “Repent therefore, and turn to God . . .”³

So it seems, therefore, whether it's congenial or not to be thundering about hell-fire and damnation, that you can't get away from repentance. It's right at the heart of the Christian message and it's important. And, of course, it's entirely possible to square the circle: you don't need to preach hell-fire and damnation to take repentance seriously. God's love is absolutely unconditional. You don't have to do anything to earn it or achieve it. You don't even have to repent of your sins. But if you've received that unconditional love, how can you do any other than repent – not beating yourself up, but aligning yourself with the one from whom that love flows?

Amen.

¹ Matthew 9: 2

² Luke 17: 3

³ Acts 3: 19