

Victorious and vindicated

9 April 2023

First Sunday in Lent

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Acts 10.34-43

Colossians 3.1-4

Matthew 28.1-10

Easter and Spring

The English word Easter comes from spring meaning the end of winter and the world coming back to life again. We see snowdrops, daffodils young animals and longer days. Spring is about new life. In our faith Easter is about resurrection and eternal life.

I imagine we have many ways to celebrate this. There are joys to be had with a hot cross bun, a chocolate easter egg or a wonderful display of flowers. The privations and disciplines of Lent are over and we celebrate. Perhaps you have family traditions of gathering together a wonderful meal and talk of the plans for the year ahead. Maybe even a summer holiday.

This is a time of turning points had to find fresh energy and ambition.

Resurrection

Our readings from the Bible this morning take hold of obviously, resurrection but many other themes that flow from it.

For the people of Jesus' day resurrection featured for some people. Those in power involved in the rituals of the temple and the politics with the Romans did not have a high regard for resurrection. The more humble Pharisees were more likely to have a strong view of resurrection. The people with very extreme views such as the zealots we're very much looking forward to God acting in power.

It is interesting that when Jesus spoke about going to Jerusalem being put to death and rising again none of his disciples took this seriously.

The deep view within the Jewish people who believed in resurrection was that God would be faithful. Over the centuries the nation had suffered in a whole variety of ways. In recent centuries there had been martyrs, people had given up their life rather than renounce their faith. These people were admired for the strength of belief and it was reasoned that God would have to be faithful to them as they had been faithful to him.

Through his ministry, Jesus powerfully raised people's hopes of God doing a new thing with his

people. Jesus drew crowds, he divided opinion, people gave their loyalty others plotted against him. It was a very fevered few years no more so that on Palm Sunday when Jesus arrived in triumph in Jerusalem.

But all through this Jesus remained somewhat mysterious. He did not want popular adulation. At one point when the crowds sought to make him king he fled (John 6.15). Jesus always sought to follow God's path rather than popularity.

Victorious

So there is ambivalence about resurrection from Jesus' contemporaries. There is Jesus' way of not just seeking to satisfy obvious expectations. Which makes accounts of resurrection more thought provoking.

The accounts in the gospels tell us that Jesus rose on the third day. Following his death the tomb is empty and his followers meet him. But Mary Magdalene in John's account mistakes him for a gardener (John 20.14,15). In Luke's Gospel Cleopas and his friend don't recognise him (Luke 24.13-15). In John's gospel, Peter and a number of disciples seemed to have not being greatly changed and gone back to being fisherman (John 21.1-3). But as for Thomas, say no more.

Jesus has risen from the grave. Death has been defeated. Here is the great victory of God. But it is taking the disciples some time for this to register. Have you ever thought about how Jesus relates to them? He could have done another triumphal entry into Jerusalem and turned the day into a great public spectacle. But instead he kindly and patiently makes himself known. He draws alongside disbelieving minds and grieving hearts to prove to them that he is with them and everything has changed.

Merely offering being a person to look at. Just giving new ideas to believe. Putting on a wonderful publicity stunt. None of these were going to be Jesus' way. He wanted people's lives to be changed and he was going to start with those who had been dearest to him throughout his ministry. It is lives that are transformed which are both the aim of Jesus and the means with which his work will continue. These are the victories that Jesus is seeking to achieve.

Vindication

So the resurrection is all about the victory of Jesus and how he makes it known to the world. The

next thing to take in is that the Father has vindicated the Son.

When Jesus went to the cross humans condemned him as being wrong and needing to be dismissed. With the resurrection the father says he is right and he is to be recognised and placed at the centre.

At Jesus' baptism a voice came from heaven and said 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Matthew 3.17). At the transfiguration a voice comes from heaven and says 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' (Matthew 17.5b). With the resurrection the action of God to defeat death is to draw our attention to the centrality of Jesus. We are then to reflect on the whole of Jesus' ministry as being something that the father was pleased with and we are to listen to.

Jesus is wise, he is compassionate, he is patient, he brings challenge, he creates community, he is forgiving. The father says the resurrection is giving honour to this way of life. It is the life of Jesus. It is offered to be the abundant life we can know. It is the life of the Kingdom of God that we seek to fill the world.

Very....

Now you might have noticed that I have used two words beginning with V, victorious and vindication. Preachers often like to have three things to say and link them with similar sounding words. But surely for resurrection this isn't good enough. A third section should be called, vigorous, vibrant, vivacious, verve, vim, virile. Resurrection is moving from black and white to colour, from routine to originality, from being bemused to being inspired. From being dead to being alive. When the Bible talks about people becoming Christians it is about a change of heart, transformation of the mind and a whole new life.

It might be our stoic British nature recoils from what looks like a call to mere enthusiasm. It might also be that our lives have been buffeted and bruised and we don't feel like jumping up and down. To which the answer is, listen to Jesus. See the way that he walks alongside the people of his day. Which one of them is you? How does he meet your situation with his resurrection?

Are you Matthew wrapped up in the busyness of your career? Don't get overwhelmed with responsibility. There is more to life than our jobs.

Are you a Mary the mother of Jesus who fears for the dangers of the world you live in? Jesus has the courage both for his ministry and her life

Are you a Nicodemus who has found inspiration but would like to keep it quiet? Jesus shows you how to come out of your shell to speak the truth you believe.

Are you are Simon? The pharisee of respected religion who finds it hard to be amongst the wayward people of our day. See the compassion Jesus has and that he wants to draw you from being judgmental.

Are you a Peter who is full of ambition and yet time and again finds they have missed the point and feels they fallen short? Jesus continually comes to him picks him up it gives him new opportunities.

Frankly I feel like I'm each one of them at some time. Which on the one hand is very bad news and I wish I could have done better. But on the other hand I'm offered the power of the resurrection. I'm given the presents are Jesus and a relationship that is going to be faithful.

Eternal life

And to crown it all death has been defeated. There are images in the Bible of what heaven is but in a way they are not to be a source of confidence. Our sure and certain hope is that Jesus has been raised to life. God says as Jesus is in you and you are in Jesus you will have a life that never dies. So we enter into it today and find the transformation taking place already because eternal life starts now. It is now that we are to listen to Jesus, walk with him add find vigor, vibrancy, vivaciousness, verve, vim and virility; all in ways that make sense to us and the lives we are living now.