

Sunday 27 March, 2016

A sermon preached The Reverend Canon James Brady at the 9am family-style Eucharist on Easter Day, 2016.

A friend of mine was once asked by a Nepalese visitor to Australia, who had never experienced Easter, what this long weekend was about. Trying to make it simple she answered "Well, Jesus was killed on Good Friday and came back to life on Easter Sunday".

To which the Nepalese visitor, not surprisingly, answered dismissively, "That's impossible".

You can't be simple about Easter. The resurrection of Jesus is a mysterious event and a unique event, and an event with a spiritual dimension transcending the physical world. . On all of these accounts it defies explanation, and description, in terms of the ordinary and the everyday. This is not surprising because even the detailed workings of the purely physical and material universe defy description in simple terms. The nature of the Higgs Boson particle, for instance, or the collision of two black holes in space producing gravitational waves are two recent discoveries in Physics which have received a lot of publicity, and which defy simple description. They both involve interactions of natural forces at extremes of magnitude where things don't behave in the way that things we touch, see and handle everyday behave. It is the same with the resurrection of Jesus which is an event straddling the boundaries of life and death. .

We do not demand that the physicists reduce their theories about the basic structure of the universe to simple everyday experiences before we will accept them. Nor should we who accept the resurrection of Jesus apologise for the fact that it is an event transcending normal human experience. The mystery that we call the resurrection, however, can be explored from various angles each of which will shed some light on it even if none can describe and explain it completely.

First, we can approach it from analogies in nature.

When we consider the world of nature we see dramatic transformations by which creatures either reproduce themselves or transform themselves into something more spectacular by passing through apparent death. Flowers drop seeds which go into the earth appearing dead. Trees drop leaves and take on a deathly appearance in the cold dark winter months, and then, with the arrival of Spring flowers and trees burst suddenly into life, and life bursts from egg and cocoon as if all of nature has been renewed. Bushfires in this country regularly turn Eucalyptus forests into acres of blackened tree trunks which in due course recover and thrive with life – their own life and that of birds and animals which have their habitat among them.

As we experience autumn now we see nature starting to die around us but we know that, come spring, it will be renewed. On Good Friday we see Our Lord dead and buried, but now on Easter Sunday, we commemorate his resurrection. The resurrection, in a mysterious way, reproduces a pattern that we see in the regular renewal of nature.

Resurrection, however, is something more than renewal. Renewal may suggest or point towards resurrection, but it is not resurrection.

When we consider the history of God's people, as recorded in the Scriptures we find, again and again, the theme of national life rising again from apparent national death. The Hebrew people were experiencing the cultural death of being slaves in Egypt but were freed, and given new life as a nation. Later we see the nation, crushed by a powerful conqueror, its people exiled from their homeland only to return a generation later, restored, to rebuild the nation.

But restoration, recovery, and rebuilding, however dramatic and however unexpected and impressive, are not resurrection. They may suggest it, or point to it, but they are not it.

In the light of further repression from without, and cynical falling away within the people of God, the great prophets of Israel fostered a hope greater than mere national survival – a hope for a future to be provided by God beyond the inevitable changes and chances of this world, a hope in which the righteous remnant of God's people, brought to the point of a threatened final extinction, will experience a final and glorious triumph, both material and spiritual – a general resurrection of the faithful of all times and places to life in an eternal kingdom.

By the end of the Old Testament period, that is by the time of Jesus, a general resurrection of the dead for final judgement -a resurrection of the righteous dead of all times to eternal life had become the way in which hope for the future took its form among the God fearing element of the Jewish people.

The disciples of Jesus came to realise that what happened to Jesus after the crucifixion was actually an anticipation of this general resurrection and they had to accept the mission, for themselves and their successors, of challenging people of all future ages to live in this world in anticipation of this final transformation so as to share in it.

The Risen Jesus is the Omega as well as the Alpha, the End as well as the Beginning. Resurrected to his place at the end point of history He appeared to the disciples to lead them forward into their mission and today he still calls us from God's future to continue that mission of bringing all things to their ultimate goal in Him.

The resurrection of Jesus was not then an isolated case of someone "coming back" from the dead. It was an insertion into human history of something God plans for us all at the end of time. And it happened because Jesus was the Son of God inserted into human history to bring that resurrection life to us now.

This is a stupendous claim. Can we be sure that it really happened?

Stupendous event though it was, the resurrection of Jesus happened in a quiet and unspectacular manner, observed by no one. Our Gospels do not attempt to describe the actual resurrection itself – rightly so, because the women and the disciples did not see it. What they all saw, at various times and in various places, was the already risen Jesus.

He appeared in the garden around the tomb; he appeared later in a locked room where the disciples were gathered in fear; on a country road and by the Lake of Galilee. Other appearances are mentioned but no details given. It says much for the authenticity of our Gospel records that they are accounts of what people actually saw. They are not speculations about what might have been happening when they were not there.

The Gospels make no attempt to explain where Jesus was after the resurrection when he was not with the disciples, just as they make no attempt to describe what happened at the tomb before the arrival of the women. These things are part of the mystery of the resurrection, and the Gospel writers are not interested in explaining what was not revealed to them. They are only interested in recording what they saw and heard, and this restraint increases the confidence we may have in their accounts.

It remains that we should also consider the mystery of the resurrection in its effects in the life of the church and in the lives of individual believers.

From being frightened, defeated and scattered the disciples of Jesus were regathered into a lively community, boldly proclaiming the Good News about Jesus and his resurrection as the centrepiece of God's plan to bless all of humankind.

They proclaimed this, and they lived and died by what they proclaimed. And down the ages countless numbers of people, great and small, have lived and died sharing the apostles' faith in the resurrection of Jesus. In the midst of death and despair, the Church is entrusted with a message of hope and the promise of life – not just survival but true and ultimate renewal through the resurrection of Jesus.

Having this belief in a future general resurrection in which God will, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, create new heavens and a new earth, might seem to lay us open to the charge that we are leading people to be indifferent to the fate of our present earth. Sadly some Christians fall into this trap – saying, for instance, that we don't need to worry about climate change because Jesus will come soon and this world will pass away anyway. It seems to me, however, that those who show themselves to be uncaring or selfish stewards of this world cannot expect God to provide them with a place in the next.

This Easter, in the light of ongoing local wars threatening to continue in their undisciplined savagery until cities are flattened and populations scattered; and in the light of widespread acts of terror and threats of more such acts; with widespread corruption in international finance, politics, sport and other bodies (the churches not being exempt); church leaders have pleaded for greater compassion, tolerance, mercy and forgiveness and the seeking of reconciliation rather than revenge. Certainly the immediate future looks dark with the threatened spread of more savage local wars and acts of terror in which no limits on human cruelty are observed; together with the threat that human greed and thoughtlessness will inflict on nature itself a death from which there may be no renewal in any form guaranteed to support the continuation of the human race.

Where, however, justice is sought, with mercy offered and compassion given, there is the possibility that the spirit of the risen Christ can gain entry to produce deeper harmony. A very important aspect of the mystery of the resurrection is that the risen Christ did not seek revenge, or punish or blame those who had opposed, betrayed, condemned, tortured and killed him but rather offered mercy, peace, love and friendship. Where these are found there groundwork is being laid for the future all-embracing coming of God's kingdom.

The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that, beyond all of the disappointments, tragedies and suffering that at times lead us to despair, there will be, beyond the darkness, not just a temporary ray of light, not just a partial recovery of good fortune, not just short lived periods of sanity, partial restorations and recoveries, but ultimately a general resurrection in which the myriads of unsung acts of goodness, compassion, courage and charity will be seen to have contributed to the preservation of earth and humanity until the time for that true resurrection which the resurrection of Jesus promises to us.

Praise God, Christ is risen. Risen he is indeed. Alleluia.