

EASTER DAY 2022

Each year we are primed for Easter Sunday by the events of Holy Week. We know how it starts and how it ends, like a favourite film we watch time and again where we can recite the dialogue as it happens. It enriches our understanding of God's saving work in Jesus every time, but it also makes it hard to stay with and grasp the shocking sense of defeat and bereavement his followers felt in those hours after Jesus expired.

As with all sudden bereavements, there was disbelief, numbness and horror. A profound feeling of being unsafe and in a place where you can't regulate emotion. Where waves sweep over, leaving you gasping for air. There was torpor and despair, and likely that strange jumpiness after someone dies where people can't think straight or conserve energy and end up doing totally unnecessary tasks. And there was also the sabbath, and what more than ever must have felt like a merciless lockdown.

Jesus had promised his friends he would rise from the dead, but there is no sense in the Gospels that they were holding on to this pledge, like people do with crumbs of comfort at the time of death. His words seem to have vanished into thin air, unregistered and unremarked on.

That Sunday morning they were talking about Jesus in the past tense, when he was about to come at them from the future. Unprepared and unable to make sense of it, the oral traditions of the resurrection couldn't even agree on the sequencing of events. There was no felt need to get the details straight when the headline was as big as this.

Over time, history and those who write it formalise and then interpret events. These histories often become stylised until revisionists come along and have another go at writing the story. But one thing we struggle with is to get inside the minds of people who lived a long time ago. It may be hard, but it's always worth the effort, and none more so than spiritual history, where we share the same Holy Spirit the early followers of Jesus did.

In today's digital culture, there is so much immediate commentary on events that we may miss things that future generations will see more clearly. This will surely be true of the pandemic. Historians will have deep and rich mines of information to access, but they are also likely to see patterns that we don't because we are the subjects of this history. One such question may be, what did this pandemic do to the nation spiritually? There have been large numbers of excess deaths and therefore bereavements; there has been enduring anxiety and uncertainty. We have spent ages talking about guidance and restrictions over our lives; we have been a bit more willing to talk about end of life care than normal. But hardly anyone talks about after life care. True to existing form, we have learned to suppress conversation over what happens next. Children are naturally spiritual, asking questions about God and life after death with no guile or embarrassment. They also learn eventually not to talk this way because grown ups don't, so that must be how to be a grown up.

For some, of course, there is nothing to talk about because nothing exists after death. But many others have questions and end up suppressing them because they don't want to feel silly or to embarrass themselves. My generation has been highly critical of cancel culture on university campuses, but we have been responsible for our own cancel culture round death. And here's the thing. It matters more deeply than any question we could pose, whether Jesus rose from the dead or not.

St Paul saw this clearly and expressed it in his first letter to the Corinthians. *If Christ has not been raised*, he said, *your faith is futile*. End of. But answering this question for ourselves is not something we see clearly today as individuals. Perhaps it all happened too long ago for people to think they need to make a judgment on the issue. Maybe we've blurred fact and fiction, truth and falsehood so much that we're not sure there are meaningful distinctions anymore. Truth becomes my view of an issue, rather than the facts surrounding the issue itself.

But if Jesus rose from the dead, it means he is who he said he was, that what he said matters more than anything you could ever hear, and that we need to make a personal response to Easter Day by giving our lives back to the one who gave his for ours.

And the sure and certain hope of resurrection is not simply personal and private, in the way our individualised society likes things to be. It is embedded in the renewal of creation. Easter tells us a new world is on its way, breaking into the everyday as a taster of what is to come. There is a mystery about the shape of this promised world, which St Paul appreciated. But it is rooted in that very earthy morning in Jerusalem when the risen Christ was mistaken for the gardener. As the late Hans Kung said so pithily: we need to think of heaven as creation healed.

In enabling people to think about this mystery, we help them by speaking clearly of its importance, both for them and for the world. If we collude with the cancel culture round spiritual matters, we deprive people of one of the deepest entitlements of life: to know about God and his everlasting love for us in Christ. But speaking openly and plainly about this, we should reclaim something of chaos and confusion of that first Easter Day. People do not lead linear and logical lives, with an ordered procession of success and perfection from beginning to end. That's the pressure many feel, but it is crippling and unhealthy. So when we help them to map the Easter story onto theirs, we should make despair and bewilderment, failure and shame a feature of it, because those feelings were still present among the friends of Jesus even after he rose from the dead and had appeared to them.

The fear, anxiety and loss of that early Easter Day is the matrix in which Jesus meets with us and speaks his first and lasting words: 'peace be with you'. The sentence that closes the books on an old world and whispers for us to join Jesus at the threshold of the new.

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