

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist
Sunday 7 April 2024
10am

Acts 4.32–35

Psalm 133

I John 1.1 – 2.2

St John 20.19–31

Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

At Easter it's all too easy to get hung up on what or might not have happened to the body of Jesus in the empty tomb. Some of us will remember the trouble the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, got into when he said that the Resurrection was "not a conjuring trick with bones." His detractors conveniently left out the word 'not'

when quoting him, and so the confected furore took off.

I'm not sure that St Thomas' doubts were about the presence of Christ in the Upper Room on that first Easter Day. We've a number of instances where Christ had raised the dead to new life, where the miracles seem to have been accepted without controversy (Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain for instance). Neither Thomas nor anyone else seemed to doubt these.

No, I think Thomas' doubts were about the *authenticity* of the vision of the Risen Christ his friends had experienced when they had broken bread the previous week. What Thomas wanted to know was Did this eucharistic experience of Christ being present in the breaking of the bread fit with Christ's own predictions of his suffering and death? Remember that Thomas had said only a couple of weeks earlier "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11¹⁶). The sight of the wounds and the marks from the nails would be enough to satisfy him.

While the Sadducees famously did not believe in Resurrection and the Old Testament is ambigu-

ous on this point, there were traditions in contemporary Jewish life which did believe it. But not in the way we mostly do. When these traditions described what we might call mystical experiences they used words like Resurrection, Rising, Being Lifted Up and so on. They were trying to describe mystical states (which are beyond language anyway), foretastes of Heaven and of God's Kingdom and future reign.

It is with one such account that the ministry of Jesus begins, at his baptism. "Just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mk 1¹⁰). St Mark tells us that the Spirit then 'drove him' out into the desert where, over the next forty days he finally vanquished the presence of the Tempter in his life, and, (at least this is my opinion) he concluded that he was the expected Messiah.

Jesus is now the Christ, the Anointed One. Henceforth the life he lives is a Resurrection life. His job is now to usher in this Kingdom of

Heaven to the here and now. He recruits disciples, twelve of them. The number symbolises the inauguration of the New Israel in which God's Kingdom will prevail. Jesus' programme, his miracles, his teaching – all these are to this one end: that his Father's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. He spells it out in terms that are both practical and ritual: "Give us each day our daily bread". It recognises the many obstacles, not least in our shortcomings and those of our fellow disciples: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us". His disciples were to do likewise.

In Acts, St Luke tells us that Christ's followers in Antioch were being called *Χριστιανούς*, Christians. This is the first use of this term and it looks very much like a made-up word. What did it mean? Followers, adherents, imitators, partisans? St Paul doesn't use this word. He prefers terms like to 'put on Christ' when exhorting his church members to live the life of the Kingdom. Later the Church will talk about being Imitators of Christ, modelling our lives on Christ's example.

In Acts chapter 4, today's first reading, St Luke is describing what the life of the first Resurrection community was like. It's incredibly practical. Everyone was sharing what they had so no one was in need. (Some may well have been thrown out by their families or synagogues or jobs.) A little earlier we'd heard how they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2⁴²).

In our second reading from the First Letter of John (possibly the same person as who had written the Fourth Gospel) we hear the author giving an account of his community's mystical experiences. Just as Christ had seen the heavens opened wide, experienced the Holy Spirit of God and heard God's voice speaking to him, so in what we might call their holy communion with Jesus Christ, St John's community had "heard, seen, and touched" the ineffable. That's how, and why, they could testify to "the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed" in Jesus Christ. Yes, John is realistic about the community's shortcomings, but he has good news about this also. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If

we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

I suspect that it was as this essentially Hebrew gospel moved out into the Graeco-Roman world of the Gentiles, and was taken up by those who were not heirs of that particular Hebrew way of understanding, the mystical experiences described in the gospels began to be understood in a different and more literal way. The gospels were no longer read as parables, as symbolic writings (like, for instance, Revelation, the last book in our Bible). They were being read more literally, more like the histories of classical historians like Herodotus or Tacitus. Which is how they were understood through the Middle Ages up to the present day.

But if we read the Easter story this way, many people today find our gospel incomprehensible. This can be true even for those of us who have been brought up with these stories in Sunday School and church. We struggle to reconcile scripture with our wider world views, with what

we learn at school, in the media, from our experience of everyday life.

Unless the church understands and acknowledges this, we will continue to bemoan what the poet Matthew Arnold called Faith's "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" as church attendance continues to fall and buildings close.

On the other hand, I believe that if we were to recover what I am suggesting was the first Gospel proclamation, the proclamation I have been outlining this morning, a gospel of God's Kingdom and the Resurrection Life in the here and now, I think the world would warm to a message that makes sense. It's a message many are longing for, and desperately want to hear.