

St Mary Abbots

Easter Day, Matins

Isaiah 43:1-21, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Father Christopher

Last week at Matins we had Palm Sunday without the donkey (and without the entry into Jerusalem, perhaps more to the point); and today, on the most important day of the year, we have Easter without the resurrection appearances. It would seem as though the Eucharist has again taken the best tunes.

We tend to think of the epistles as kinds of commentary on the gospels, and therefore as rather secondary. Most of them are however written significantly *before* the gospels. And 1 Corinthians was written by St Paul in the mid-50s, only 20 years after Jesus's death, probably closer to His lifetime in fact than it was to the writing down of the gospels.

That's not to say that the gospel stories weren't floating around long before being formally recorded of course.

But the passage from 1 Corinthians which we heard is in fact the very earliest reference anywhere to Jesus having been raised from the dead. So no, you have not been short-changed! Indeed because St Paul had already written what had happened, the evangelists, the gospel writers, may have felt freer to take a more poetic approach, as they described the different experiences of those who encountered Jesus in those strange, terrifying, wonderful days.

It is easy to let that passage from 1 Corinthians go over your head, so familiar is it to us, and particularly the message which it tells. Indeed, how many of you of you listened actively to it, rather than simply letting its familiarity wash over you?

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve.

So familiar is this that it's actually really *hard* to focus on what it's telling us, even when you're trying. This is however the very first Christian creed, the very first attempt by anyone to summarise what we as Christians believe in: that Christ died for our sins, was buried and raised again on the third day. Bang. And there you have it: the most fundamental things you need to believe in order to be able to call yourself a Christian.

He doesn't tell us that he made it up, but that it was passed on to him. And the word used there in Greek for being passed on to him is the same word that in Latin becomes 'tradition'. That is what tradition is: something which is passed on to us, and, hopefully, which we in turn pass on to others. And think about it, if it was written down by him in the 50s, 20 years after Christ died and was raised, those core beliefs must have been established pretty much immediately after His death. What do we believe in? What do you believe in?

It's very easy to come to church, perhaps particularly here, because you like the music, or just because you always have; and that is fine. But St Paul reminds us what is at the core of our belief, '*as of the first importance*', that is: that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day.

He also reminds us what we are here for, first and foremost: to hand it on. To witness to it, to Him, and to those core beliefs about Him. '*Whether it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.*' Just as throughout our passage from Isaiah we have these twin themes, of being saved by God and witnessing to Him:

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.' '*Do not fear, for I am with you. ... You are my witnesses, says the Lord.*'

This total confidence may seem hard to replicate, particularly at times such as the present ones. It may have seemed easier to resonate with the Lamentations which we were reading throughout the earlier part of Holy Week:

'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.'

I have to say, I have been particularly struck by the power of some of those passages in relation to the pain and suffering I know some parishioners are going through: whether through illness; or our Afghan refugees who are being moved on from here next month, necessitating their children having to leave the schools they have just started in; new Ukrainian parishioners worrying about their brothers and sons preparing to fight in the east of their country; and indeed on Good Friday itself, sitting at my desk tired after the Maundy Thursday vigil, but determined to finish this sermon, I got a message from an incredible woman who coordinates our local work with refugees, describing an Iranian refugee trying on clothes in front of her this week, and revealing a torso ridged with scarring from being whipped repeatedly, and not being able to get that image out of her mind. And I just cried.

This is the world we live in, and it might seem tempting to give up hope at times. Particularly given the lack of compassion shown by some in authority, seeking to remove such people far from our borders and from our consciences.

Such a response, such an emotion, might seem horribly apt on Good Friday, but what are we to do with it today? We cannot just magic such feelings away because Jesus is risen can we?

The rhythms of the church year *sometimes* resonate powerfully with how we are feeling, but at other times they strike a distinctly discordant note. We might have been marking Jesus's suffering after the loss of a child; but then *how* to turn to the joy of the resurrection? _Or indeed we might have been celebrating getting engaged last week, and only want the joy of Easter, without feeling any sense of engagement with the cross.

But just as when in the midst of life we are in death, so, as Christians, when in death we are in life. This is the absolute core and strength of our faith. And it is at the heart of St Paul's message. In his letter to the Philippians he spoke of being in chains for Christ. And then he immediately goes on to say, 'Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.' And in the Russian kontakion for the dead they sing: '*All we go down to the dust; and weeping o'er the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.*'

This is not blind, deluded, optimism in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. This is a life lived in the light of those words of St Paul's:

"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

We might doubt at times, and our hope might fade in the face of the worst that life can throw at us, and the sun seem eclipsed by so much that grieves God in the world He created; but the more we seek to live out, inhabit and grow in faith in the Christ who died and rose again, the more we cannot help but cry 'Alleluia'.

For in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, all that we know is transfigured. And in His rising from the dead, death has lost its sting, death is swallowed up in victory. Christ is Risen, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!