

**Sunday 12 May 2024**  
**The Seventh Sunday of Easter**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**NT: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26**

**NT: 1 John 5:9-13**

**Gp: John 17:6-19**

I was in Hereford a couple of weekends ago; as is often my custom, I managed to proclaim the gospel in the local pubs. One of those pubs had an impressive collection of Eastern Orthodox icons on one side. I ended up having a conversation with a visiting American and of course I revealed that I was a priest. I was asked: 'Do you really know that God exists? How do you know that the Christian faith is true?' Now there are two very tempting ways of responding to these questions; and both are wrong. You could take the defensive line and say: 'of course I really have no idea; it is just how I think what true faith is; but I may be wrong'; or you could take the more confident line and suggest that I had all the philosophical arguments and the historical evidence, so what is the problem?

The first defensive line is a mistake because it reduces faith to opinion and shrinks everything you want to say to the dimension of one's mind or one's preferences; the second is also a mistake because it provides an impersonal answer, putting oneself at arm's length from the whole enterprise, regardless of what anyone else thinks about it. It's true in much the same way as saying that The Beatles came from Liverpool. So, 'there you go', but it's doubtful whether it will make us fall on our knees.

Our readings today in fact contain all the mysteries we celebrate when we say the creeds, and when we celebrate the Eucharist. In the epistle for today, we are told: 'God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life'. In the Gospel, we are given the words of Jesus' prayer: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him'. Out of these two heavily charged texts comes the classic Christian conviction that in Jesus Christ we encounter the truth, and this is a truth about who God is and who we are as human beings. Not living into that truth has consequences, we are told. There have been moral and philosophical objections to these claims in the last century. What about all these others who have never heard of Jesus? Does this mean that we shut up anyone who says different things? How is it that a truth expressed in Palestine 2000 years ago can be applied to other contexts? We prefer to be presented these days with various choices with which we may be more comfortable than to commit to one or the other truth.

When Peter stood and preached about the Resurrection to the people of Jerusalem saying that their only hope was in Christ, he was of course talking to people who were involved in the drama of Jesus' death.

He was not speaking to the 'Chinese', or telling them 'Unless you follow these beliefs and accept them to be true, there is no life for you'. Instead, he was telling them, if you want hope, you need to face your own victim. Without a vital relationship with Jesus Christ who is the word of God made flesh, you will not become what you were made to be. Jesus comes and our habitual response is to kill him because he is the truth. This is what you might call our original sin; we have all been implicated. It's this claim, not some much a unique truth in a form of words; but *a relationship* to stand where Jesus stands and be able to call God 'Father'. Jesus in the New Testament is not a piece of fantasy or wishful thinking but the actual living presence in the world who has done what the law cannot do.

He brings those who have condemned him into a new universe. They can live in a new climate in which the barriers they have put up between themselves and others and God have been shattered by the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. The Resurrection shows that his life is like God's life: it's indestructible. He is not just some nice bloke who sadly died and whose grave we can visit. He is alive and ahead of us. Because of that, a new community evolved and developed from its parent Jewish tradition as it followed that path that opened up in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. Our faith does not look back to a great teacher and example as other faith traditions might emphasise. Our faith directs us forward to where Jesus leads, to being at home with God. What is the way to God the Father, well the Father is not just an abstract idea of something out there. He is discovered as we walk with Jesus and his community. We may of course go on trying to put up barriers ourselves again. But, our selfish and destructive acts, so abundantly evident in the history of the Church too, can still be overwhelmed by the love that we celebrate at the Eucharist.

How do we know? We look around and we see a world that feels as though without God, where children are being killed by wars or by disease, where tyrants are planning to secure their power over suffering populations, where many of our own communities are struggling to put their lives together in the wake of our various crises here at home. So how do we know the hope that is there in the Risen and ascended Christ? Again, it would be a mistake to work it out as a well-founded opinion, or by assuming that this idea suits us; we don't get all the arguments straight and can't. We know simply because we are dimly aware of something that has changed around us. For the disciples gathered around in the first century, things were not looking up. They had numerous challenges, including how to make decisions together. But something happened that had an impact on them; they met their own victim as their own source of hope and grace was released. When Paul wrote his letters, he was not aware that he was writing the New Testament at all. He may not have been a good speaker either; he tells us himself as much. But he was so intensely aware that the world around him has changed, so went about to change the world in return. People trusted him.

So, we are drawn too, not because this is an attractive theory that we decided to try out and we may be wrong. Nor is it that we have all the knock-down arguments that will convince everyone. Instead, there is something more compelling here. We can't help but to be drawn to this promise of life and freedom and that is not just because of my own opinions alone. The question then is not 'can anyone believe this?' but 'can anyone live like this?' St Paul joined the Christian community not as a well-meaning religious enquirer but as someone who had been the equivalent of a terrorist gunman, someone who had supervised a private militia devoted to abducting and imprisoning members of the Christian sect. He could be a figure in the back street of modern Beirut or Baghdad. He found his 'heaven' by going, undefended, to the people he has been trying to silence and kill. Can anyone live like this? If the Romans, or the Corinthians, had asked this, Paul was able to say 'yes'. And the moral of all of this? It's boringly familiar. If we want to commend our faith, we have to show the difference. The new world has to be visible. How do we know that this is the Truth? Perhaps, the only response that is fully adequate and in tune with the witness to the Resurrection of Christ is to say simply: 'Are you hungry? Here is food at this altar'.

**Fr Yazid Said**