

Sunday 4 May 2025
The Third Sunday of Easter

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 9:1-6

NT: Revelation 5:11-14

Gp: John 21:1-19

As some of you know, I spent Easter this year in the Holy Land. It is common to greet one another in Jerusalem on Easter Day with: 'Christ is Risen', instead of 'good morning'. You tend to get the expected response: 'He is Risen indeed' with a great sense of hope and trust. When I was a student in Cambridge, I used to greet people similarly on Easter Sunday with the same greeting and say, 'Christ is Risen'. But people sometimes responded with: 'I know', perhaps reflecting an inherent English reticence in spelling out responses, or because of coming to Church after having had a few pints in the pub if it were for the Easter Vigil. But the response 'I know' could also mean something else; it could mean, Christ is Risen, so what? What is the point really? Indeed, how can people living in the Holy Land today in a context of land grab, identity struggle, political and national devastations, understand, or celebrate the Resurrection with such hope and trust.

Easter is undoubtedly an awkward event. It was indeed awkward for the disciples, and the women who first faced that unexpected news. We might assume that surely the Resurrection is about those precious moments of happy endings, of personal encounter with the risen Jesus on the part of a range of people, those mysterious and elusive meetings described in the gospels. But that is not what we get. Instead, we have stories that show the disciples confused and challenged. Jesus is neither a ghost, nor a resuscitated body. It's like waking up in the morning and being blinded by the light. You can't make sense of what is going on. In John's gospel, we get a sort of a fading comment: Jesus meets the disciples at the lake shores and then the writer says: 'I could tell you much more, but I would never finish'.

Well, how disappointing for us. Easter is difficult to relate to. The stories are beyond what we could cope with; they are not the same tidy stories we face in the rest of the gospels. But the fact that they are NOT tidy stories should be enough reason for learning more, rather than shunning them away.

In our gospel today, Jesus appears to his disciples on the seashore, a return to where Jesus first met his disciples. This morning's story is set out with skill: 'I am going fishing', says Peter – Back to the very beginning where Peter was faced with his reality as a sinner the first time he met Jesus, when he was fishing. There is apparently a connection in the French language between fishing and sinning. The two words are rather uncomfortably close: 'pêche' or 'péché'. It is a dangerous thing to say in French, 'I am going to spend the weekend fishing', unless you're quite sure where the accent is going to fall. But the point is the Risen Christ appears to heal our own ruins. Peter with his memories of terror and betrayal and shame

comes back to his beginning, back to his 'earth' in Galilee. Peter's threefold denial is countered in the story today with the threefold confession and Jesus' threefold charge to feed his sheep. Note how Jesus' command is not 'manage or administer' the sheep, not even 'teach my sheep', but 'feed my sheep'. And of course, we get that poignant detail about the 'fire of coals' burning on the shore, just as there was in the High Priests' courtyard, when Peter denied Christ. Peter stands again in the place of his calling and his failure; he smells the scent of his betrayal from the smoke of the fire. That is where his future lies, where his pastoral authority comes from; his martyr's crown appears in his memory of failure in the presence of the undefeated, ever faithful risen Lord.

The Resurrection is not then a reversal of the history, but more of a recapitulation. The failures of the disciples, the cross of Christ, are the reality of our world. The memories are not cancelled out but taken up in a new age, a new creation. There lies the continuity of the disciples' experience. We don't have here a shattering conversion which covers up on the shame of the past; instead, we are led by the hands of Christ, gentle and relentless, to remind us, 'here I called you', 'here we broke bread together', 'here you denied me' but here I still stand with you. So, is there a way of speaking of the resurrection in a context of devastation like the Holy Land today? The memory of the wounds of both Israelis and Palestinians, the acute consciousness of their history, does not seem easy to negate. Only last week, there was a joint Israeli Palestinian Memorial Day event, which was held at a Reform Synagogue in the town of Ra'nana, something that should give us a sense of hope, as both sides come to remember the other's victims. But sadly, the event was attacked by Jewish Far-Right mobs and Israel's political leadership remained silent. The attack was reported in the local media. An Israeli friend of mine told me if something like this happened in a synagogue in the UK, whilst the government remained silent, the British government would have had to resign. Instead, we have an Israeli government keen to remember the defeats not just of recent history, but of hundreds and thousands of years ago with resentment even today. This kind of constant bewailing is a sure recipe for a pathological society and the effect in reaction on Palestinians is simply devastating.

This is not the gospel of the Resurrection we heard today. We are instead celebrating hope, authentic hope, and the readiness not to see restoration as something to be won and held at the expense of the rest of humanity, but as a significant awareness of our past and our failures. Our future will NOT be ours without the concrete memories of all our past. To deny that is to deny that we are particular human beings, with stories that were sewn together with other human beings in which we made lots of messy decisions. Individual conversion and political talk about revolution might represent something important, but if they are considered in isolation as if they do not belong together, they are potentially inhuman things. To acknowledge 'original sin', then, is to acknowledge our human reality, to begin to understand ourselves through our memories. That is where restoration begins. There will be memories that we prefer to shut away from God and our own consciousness. However, the Risen Christ is relentless in always being ahead of us, trying to help make

these memories not simply a cause of resentment, but part of our thanksgiving – which is the hard bit. To acknowledge what we are and what we have been and bless God whose grace makes new opportunities out of our mess and sin and unhappiness is not exactly straightforward.

This is what St Paul faces in his conversion, the story we heard in our first lesson. He was a persecutor, with a martyr's blood on his hands. In fact, you might think of St Paul as a member of one of the militias in the streets of Beirut. But he faces his victim! He faces Jesus in the form of his body the Church that he was persecuting. There lies Paul's grace. For him that was the most extreme and unexpected work of the risen Christ, appearing 'as to one untimely born', as he put it; from that persecutor, God made an apostle.

The Hope of the Holy Land, like our hope, is a hope for the past, a hope for our native soil. God takes us back to the place where our cities and aspirations were destroyed and defeated. We return to the old Jerusalem, and we discover that God belongs to the future, in the new city that comes down from heaven, entirely fresh in a way that none of us could have planned. Yet it is made from the messy and unlovely bricks of our own past. Our dull lives after all are the living stones of the New Jerusalem. We stand here at the gates of the new Jerusalem at this altar, as we sing with full voice in the words of our second reading: 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing'.

Fr Yazid Said