

Easter Sunday

St. Brandon's

John 20: 1-18

1st April 2018

You may know that in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus tells His disciples three times about His impending death and resurrection. The first time in each gospel is immediately after Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. The second in each gospel is shortly after the transfiguration. The third time is somewhat later in each gospel. Apart from the second time in Luke (where all Jesus says is that, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands"), the 'formula' is the same: Jesus tells of His suffering, death and resurrection. For our purposes this morning I want to concentrate on the last two parts, death and resurrection, and to make the obvious point that when Jesus tells His disciples about His destiny, death and resurrection are always linked – it's never just about His death.

Now you might say, wait a minute, we're in John's gospel this morning (we will get there eventually, I promise), and John's gospel doesn't have these same declarations. Quite right, but I still think the same point can be made though from different passages in John. In John's gospel (and only in John's gospel), in response to a request from the Jews for a sign to validate who He was, Jesus says "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19), speaking of course of His body. (Now some of you will be thinking, hold on a moment, this occurs in other gospels too, and yes it does but only on the lips of others accusing Jesus at His trial – Matt. 26:61; Mark 14: 58). The point is that in John Jesus again links His death and resurrection. Similarly, when Jesus finally declares that His hour has come (when some Greeks ask to see Him), He immediately goes on to declare that, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit" (12:24). Death and resurrection again. Also unique to John's gospel is the raising of Lazarus during which Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25). But He does so *after* Lazarus has died and *before* he is raised from death. Jesus is, again, linking death and resurrection.

So it seems that Jesus always links the two. It is always death *and* resurrection, as though this is one event in two parts, as though there is an inevitable movement from one to the other, as though we can't have one without the other. And that might give us pause for thought. We have just emerged from six weeks of Lent, focusing mainly on the death part, on the cross, on our sin and the world's sin, on our wretchedness and so on. Now that isn't a bad thing, of course, particularly if we understand Christ's suffering and death as showing us a God who enters into all the suffering and pain and darkness and death of this world and somehow absorbs it, somehow takes away the sin of the world including our own. But if that's where we leave it, then we have only half the story. And it can be dangerous, as with an understanding of what Christ was achieving on the cross being to do with a sacrifice to placate an angry God. Sacrificial victims are always killed or expelled – there's no need for resurrection, so that resurrection comes along as an awkward afterthought in that way of understanding the cross.

But equally, we are just entering the Easter period when we focus on the resurrection. Now again that isn't a bad thing, of course, but if it isn't connected to Jesus' death then it can become all about flowers and bunny rabbits and chickens and Easter eggs – something vaguely about new life, but not really connected to the real dirt and pain and suffering and death of the world.

Occasionally in our liturgy, we get it right, as in the first part of one of the absolutions in our Lent service booklet (the one Alison used on Tuesday night this week): "God, the Father of mercies, has reconciled the world to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ ...".

In what ways, then, do the gospels make this connection between death and resurrection explicit in their telling of the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection, apart from just the chronology (that Jesus died and was then raised)?

Matthew's gospel is interesting in this respect in that it is only Matthew who reports that immediately after Jesus' death there was an earthquake, and "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52), and appeared in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection. Here's a direct connection between death and life restored, if not quite to resurrection itself. I say 'not quite to resurrection' partly because resurrection life is another order of being, something very different from what we experience here in this life, as we see in Jesus' resurrection body, and partly because presumably, those who were raised to life, including Lazarus of course, subsequently died again – they are not still alive and well and living in a semi in Surbiton, at least as far as we know.

But there is, I think, another very powerful connection between death and resurrection in the gospels which does (finally) link to our gospel reading this morning. But to get there, we again have to start with the three synoptic gospels. In each of these (but again not in John), Jesus' death is tied very closely to the tearing in two of the curtain in the Temple. Matthew records that Jesus "breathed his last [and] *at that moment* the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (27:51). Mark simply has that Jesus "breathed his last ... and the curtain ... was torn in two" (15:38). Luke has it the other way round – the curtain was torn in two and "*Then* Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this he breathed his last" (23: 45-46). So all three gospels tie Jesus' death and the tearing of the curtain in the Temple very closely together – they happen just about simultaneously, and almost as though one depends upon the other. But having made this apparently very important connection, the synoptic gospels don't come back to it. But John's gospel does. Let me try to explain.

The curtain was the entrance-way into the Holy of Holies at the centre of the Temple. This was understood as a place where God the creator dwelt, beyond and outside of creation. And once a year, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies, having made a sacrifice to cover his own sins, and sacrifice a goat which was known as the Lord, and sprinkle the Mercy Seat (the throne above which were the Cherubim), the Ark of the Covenant and so on with what was, in effect, God's blood. He would then put on a brilliant white robe representing an angel, but an angel whose name was 'the Son of Man', emerge from the Holy of Holies, put on another robe made from the same material as the curtain, a rich material representing the material world, and sprinkle the rest of the Temple with the blood which was the Lord's blood, thereby making atonement for and undoing the way in which humans had snarled up creation.

Now, OK, that was an ancient rite which it's difficult to get our heads around completely. There are two key points, however. The first is that it was a sacrificial movement by God out into the world, the sacrifice of His own blood to take away the sins of the world. The second point is that the tearing of the curtain at Christ's death now indicated that this rite was at an end – the Holy of Holies, the place where God was understood to dwell, was no longer a secret place which only the high priest could enter, only once a year. It was now unmasked and open. That's why the synoptic gospels felt it was so important to include and link the tearing of the curtain with the death of Jesus, even if they didn't follow it up.

But this is where John's gospel picks it up. For when Mary looks into the tomb she sees two angels, one at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus' body had been. This is the Mercy Seat with the Cherubim, this is the Holy of Holies, but it is now not in the Temple but out in the world. But, more than that, the place where God was meant to be, on the Mercy Seat or throne, is empty because Jesus has been raised, and is outside the tomb, outside of the Holy of Holies, alive and at large in the world, as Mary is about to discover. In other words, the sacrificial rite is over once for all, God's blood has been shed one

final time, *and* Jesus has been raised, and is alive and at large in the world. Death *and* resurrection, one event in two parts, as Jesus had said all along.¹

Now, what does all of that say to us? Well, I think it says something which I am only beginning to get my head around. You see, if the death and resurrection of Christ are so fundamentally linked, it is not just that Christ through His death enters into all the suffering and pain and darkness and death of this world and somehow absorbs it, somehow takes away the sin of the world including our own. It is also that there is now the potential for the transformation of every single bit of suffering and pain and darkness and death through Christ's resurrection life. He doesn't just identify with it and absorb it, but transforms it through the power of the resurrection. We might put it like this: all the mess and snarling up of creation is pregnant with resurrection life. All the mess and snarling up of creation, every single bit of it, is pregnant with resurrection life.

Can we believe that? Can we believe that "the Holocaust and the cancer cell, the terrorist bomb and the black depression, [every] ... experience of sickness, pain or bereavement"² are all pregnant with resurrection life? Can we believe that they can and will enter into quite another order of being, healed, restored, forgiven? Can we believe that God, the Father of mercies, has reconciled the world to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ? And then can we live that out to the glory of God?

Amen

¹ Most of the above draws on or is extracted from James Alison, *Undergoing God. Dispatches from the scene of a break-in*, DLT, 2006, pp. 52-7, and also Rowan Williams 'Between the cherubim: the empty tomb and the empty throne', in *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp.183-96. See also Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest. The Temple roots of Christian liturgy*, London: Continuum, 2004.

² Michael Mayne, *Dust that dreams of glory*, Canterbury Press, 2017, p. 54.