

Readings for Easter Day

31st March 2024

First Reading: Acts 20:34-43

Peter began to speak to those assembled in the house of Cornelius: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

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, 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. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Gospel: St Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he

is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

A Reflection for Easter Day

‘I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you’. So begins Paul in today’s passage from his first letter to the Corinthians.

As we look around the world today, seeing and hearing the reports of wars and violence, of tragedies, of hardship, or destruction of the natural world, it is hard not to feel downcast; it is hard not to feel helpless. But, this is the day above all others when we remember and celebrate that, despite the awful things that happen in the world, death does not have the final word; that forces of evil will not triumph. This is the day above all others when we remember that God took the apparent tragedy of the Cross and turned it into resurrection celebration. This the day above all others when we are assured that God is bigger than our fears, our sorrows and our losses.

At the heart of the Gospel, the ‘good news’, that Paul so desperately wanted his audience to understand, is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again on the third day. It is reiterated in all our readings today. Paul says it in Corinthian’s. In Acts, Peter, speaking at the house of Cornelius says ‘They put him to death by hanging him on a tree but God raised him on the third day...’. And, in Mark’s Gospel, the angelic figure in the tomb, the young man dressed in white, tells the startled women ‘...you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’

There is nothing stronger than the power of God’s love and this was God’s supreme act of love, that he raised Jesus from the dead. Paul knew that only too well; he had been a persecutor of the early church and acknowledges that it was through God’s grace that he was called as an apostle.

Maureen reminded us last week when considering the events of the Passion, our familiarity with the Resurrection accounts can lead to us overlook the astonishing details. And if we do attend to them, we find ourselves with all sorts of questions.

As the theologian, Tom Wright, points out, it is not a recent discovery that dead people don’t rise, and yet all our readings today tell us of the witnesses to Christ’s resurrection, that, in this case, this is exactly what happened.

In Mark’s account, the women who had themselves come to the tomb in an act of love, as they thought to anoint Jesus’ body, were instead told by the angelic figure that Jesus was raised and, in fulfilment of his own promises to them, was going ahead of the disciples to Galilee where they would see him. They themselves saw the empty tomb. In Acts, Peter says that he and others were first-hand witnesses who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And Paul refers to a whole series of witness numbering hundreds of people.

There were many witnesses to the risen Jesus, although the different accounts can sometimes be confusing or even elusive in what they say and don’t say. But, as Tom Wright also points out, ‘confusing reports of surprising events don’t mean that nothing happened.’

Various theories have been proposed over the years to try to explain away the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There have been suggestions that his followers, overcome by grief and unable to come to terms with what has happened, believed that what they hoped for had taken place. Or that they had visions; or some sort of warm feelings of God's presence. Or that resurrection was metaphor for Jesus being raised to heaven. But these theories are not consistent with the testimony of these many witnesses in the early church, or with the understanding of the time.

In the first century CE, the words that we translate as 'resurrection' meant bodily life after bodily death. There were many Jewish leaders who were killed by the Romans, but it was only with Jesus of Nazareth that it was claimed that he had been raised. To do so was dangerous, inviting the same end, yet many witnesses attested to the truth of this having happened. Some of these witnesses were unlikely and unwilling – the women who fled from the tomb were, not surprisingly, afraid and at first told no-one. Yet, eventually the enormity of what they had witnessed prompted them to speak out; if it hadn't, no-one would have heard any more about Jesus.

Not all Jews believed in resurrection. In the Gospels we read of the disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees on the matter. Yet resurrection was central to Christian belief from the start; first the resurrection of Jesus, to be followed by others later. Furthermore, for Christians, the resurrected body was a transformed body, one that would no longer suffer or die. So the church continued to hold to the truth of resurrection, despite persecution.

So today, we continue to celebrate with joy the good news of Christ's resurrection. Paul reminds his audience, we need to hold firmly to this 'good news', especially in times of difficulty, in the times we feel overwhelmed and helpless, when we may be tempted to turn away. Paul says that he handed on this good news as of first importance to the Corinthians and many thousands have continued to do so in the intervening centuries; now it is our turn. And just as the women at the tomb on that first Easter morning were told that Jesus would go ahead of the disciples, so he continues to show us the way, giving us direction and purpose in our lives as we seek to follow him. God continues to be at work in the world, particularly where there is crisis, sorrow or pain, bringing comfort, hope and resurrection.

'I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you'. 'Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again on the third day.'