



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 23rd April 2023

Readings: Acts 2.14, 36-41; Luke 24.13-35

Easter III

A fortnight after Easter, what are we making of the resurrection? Maybe the Emmaus 2, setting out on their seven-mile walk, speak for us, in their wonderment, confusion, and questions. I am pretty certain that few of us will ever bottom what Easter and the resurrection are all about in such a way that we can explain it as easily as we can the recipe for shortbread or the rules of tennis, though maybe cricket and the resurrection are as complex as each other. But I do not think acknowledging how hard it is should mean we give up exploring the meaning and power of the empty tomb. Nor do I preach this sermon to provide definitive arguments, so much as to share a few people's ideas so that we are stimulated for our journey as Easter people.

In that second reading, we find Peter addressing the crowd who may well have shared our wonderment, confusion, and questions. We are told they comprised people from 'Judea and all who live in Jerusalem'. That sounds slightly exaggerated, and it is often suggested that his sermon was intended as a sort of pep talk to Christians who were struggling to retain their 'boldness, faith and confidence in the face of struggles' and of other people's opposition.¹ So, Saint Luke – the probable author of Acts – has him articulate what F. F. Bruce calls, 'the foundation truth on which the Church was built'.² It is this: '*let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*' To borrow a financial term, here's Christianity's bottom line: God has made Jesus Lord and Messiah.

It's unsurprising, if the crowd are of the Jewish faith, that Peter would draw on key Jewish ideas, not least from the Psalms. They'd know what it meant to explain Jesus as Lord and Messiah because that is what their religion taught them to await, to expect. Today, different translators try to have Peter speak as clearly now as Luke has him do two thousand years ago. After all, quite apart from speaking persuasively to an increasingly secularising society, and striving to avoid exclusive or archaic terms, the Church in the twenty-first century can itself be markedly sceptical or timid. Its own faith needs building up. So contemporary versions of 'Lord and Messiah' include couplets like 'Messiah and Sovereign'³, 'Master and Messiah'⁴, 'Chosen Leader'⁵, or 'Leader and Lord'⁶. Essentially, though, Peter's sermon wants us to recognise the risen Jesus Christ as the 'bearer of the divine image and reality'⁷; the risen Christ symbolises that God is and always will be alive, active and unequalled.

Last week I quoted Lesslie Newbigin, a New Testament scholar and missiologist, who ninety years ago sat in this sanctuary Sunday by Sunday. Today, I turn to the writings of another scholar – one who week by week climbed into the pulpit of Emmanuel Church from 1894-1901. It is Peter Taylor Forsyth, once described as 'a liberal ... in his demand for intellectual liberty' ... but not when it espoused 'a version of Christianity which so sought to accommodate to the modern mind that it made a shipwreck of the historic faith'.⁸ Let's see what he makes of Jesus.

In his 1909 book, *The Person and Place of Christ*⁹, Forsyth suggests that the whole point of Jesus Christ – including the cross and resurrection – is not best grasped by right ideas *about* him, but by a

¹ Willimon, William H. 1988 *Acts – an Interpretation Bible Commentary* Louisville: John Knox Press p 35

² Bruce, F. F. 1951, 1952 *The Acts of the Apostles: the Greek text with introduction and commentary* Leicester: InterVarsity Press p 96

³ Priests for Equality 2007 *The Inclusive Bible: the first egalitarian translation* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers p 718

⁴ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002 *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* Colorado Springs: NavPress p 1971

⁵ Henson, John *Good as New: a radical retelling of the scriptures* Alresford: O Books p 245

⁶ Dale, Alan T. 1967 *New World: the heart of the New Testament in Plain English* Oxford: OUP p 141

⁷ Jennings, Willie James 2017 *Acts – a Belief Bible Commentary* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press p 35

⁸ Hunter, A. M. 1974 *P. T. Forsyth: per crucem ad lucem* London: SCM Press Ltd p 15

⁹ Forsyth, P. T. 1909, eighth impression 1955 *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* London: Independent Press pp 94ff

right relation *to* him. That sounds not unlike the Emmaus 2. All their discussing and debating with the stranger on the two-hour trek fascinates them, but as they reach their home and invite him to stay with them, he remains a stranger; they don't know him. It's at the meal table, in the fellowship of broken bread - and, if Caravaggio is to be believed, of Roast Chicken, too - that the penny drops. Ideas might help our thinking and improve our living, they might worthily occupy the Church, and even soothe our individual suffering, but they do not put us right with God. That happens in those encounters and experiences that are like bread-breaking 'aha' moments. Of course, in recalling the eloquent silence of Calvary and at the garden tomb. But also, in the snowdrop unbent by the blizzard, the compassion enduring ingratitude, the resilience that 'traces the rainbow through the rain'.¹⁰

Forsyth is an expert in contrasting thoughts. Wanting us to grasp that what matters is Jesus's work for us, rather than our words about Jesus, P. T. Forsyth asks:

Did [Jesus] come to transfigure before [us] the great religious and ethical ideas, **or** to infuse into [us] new power, in the thorough, final, and godlike sense of endowing [us] with a new and ransomed life?

Did [Jesus] *refurbish* Humanity **or** *redeem* it?

Dr Forsyth goes on to contrast an understanding of Christianity that is *rational* with one that is *redemptive*. He seems to me entirely to get the desire of people for answers to their questions, and decisive arguments for their discussions, and he ably assists in offering them.

But, as Cleopas and their companion found, gaining those things is not where our hope lies. Forsyth puts it like this:

The real object of Christian research is not the purely historic Christ ... nor is it Humanity's spiritual ideal; but within the historic Christ it is the living God, the Saviour, *who chose us to choose him.*'

And I think that is what he means by his implication that Christianity, ultimately, is not made authentic by right ideas *about* God in Christ, but by a right relation *to* God in Christ – the chosen choosing the Choser.

So, if any of this is worth taking seriously, where might it leave us? Well, primarily it leaves us with plenty still to ponder. I do not fool myself this morning that the Easter musings of some of you over the last eight decades will suddenly be satisfied, any more than mine is. The One who chose us to choose them will forever keep us pondering and praying ... and discovering in wondrously Damascene moments. But there is actually stuff for us *to do*, as well.

First, Peter urges those first-century Judeans to *repent and be baptised*. This is about turning with contrition from what has distracted us from God, back to face God and to be embraced by God. A Christian is invited to turn back confidently, knowing that they will be as accepted by God as was that Prodigal Son. And maybe that is why some think that the word from which repentance is derived also implies 'comfort'. It's about turning back to God whose promise is always to have mercy and never to reject. Baptism is offered as the seal of that acceptance and embrace. To put it poetically, it celebrates that we have been taken 'home'.

And the other thing Peter enjoins upon his hearers is to *receive the Holy Spirit*. That is a dynamic thing. The Holy Spirit never leaves us where it finds us. It feeds our faith, drives us into serving God's purposes, enables us to love, and bestows God's peace. Peter's observation of his own era is that it is a 'corrupt generation'. I wonder if that sounds like ours, as we need to remember Stephen Lawrence's death thirty years on, and to read headlines about bullying in high places ... as if it did not happen in lower ones, too. The word translated 'corrupt' has implications of 'twisted', hence 'corrupt', but there's also a suggestion of 'winding'. Might that help us describe our era, when it

¹⁰ from the hymn, *O love, that wilt not let me go* (RS 511.3.3) by George Matheson (1842-1906)

seems that we so easily allow our wondering to morph into an aimless wandering – a winding? Do you sometimes fear we are losing our way – ethically, morally, spiritually? As Peter urges his hearers to receive the Spirit, so it's as if he urges them to let God's resurrection work save them for a more purposeful, a more faithful way. You see, what the NRSV translates as 'Save yourselves' is in fact a passive imperative. Let yourselves be saved from this wandering, for the new living of the baptised, where the undefeated and indefatigable truth, mercy and love of God equip us for the life we asked for at the start of the service, as we sang the Lord's Prayer: 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' I believe we can make nothing better of the resurrection than that it shapes our life as Easter people who trust *that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah*.

To God alone be the glory.

Amen

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ,
who came to the world not to be served
but also, surely, not to be admired,
or in that sense to be worshipped.
You are the way and the truth –
and it was followers only you demanded.
Arouse us therefore if we have dozed away into this delusion,
save us from the error of wishing to admire you
instead of being willing to follow you
and to resemble you.¹¹

Amen

N. P. Uden
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¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard 1813-55 LeFevre Perry D. ed 1956 *The Prayers of Kierkegaard* Chicago: University of Chicago page 96 altd