



Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 6th August 2023

Readings: Matthew 14:13-21; Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

On the top of Mount Corcovado in Rio de Janeiro stands the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer. It is a fantastic statue made of reinforced concrete and covered with thousands of triangular soapstone tiles. It stands 30m high atop a pedestal of another 8m which add to its height; a huge statue which is regarded as one of the seven wonders of the modern world having been completed in 1931. The original design was slightly different but now the statue stands with arms outstretched – again great measurements, a 28m span. What, I wonder, are we to make of it? I must confess a certain unease with statues of Christ but setting that aside, how are we to understand this statue? With arms outstretched the figure seems to embrace the city or even the world. Perhaps the outstretched arms bring to mind the crucifixion, though actually the statue is described as being a sign of peace. As I said, it is made of reinforced concrete and soap stones and is a wonder of the world.



But what of the real thing? What of the real person, Christ the Redeemer? Is he regarded as a wonder? Does he challenge our senses, stop us in our tracks, demand our attention?

Let us travel back to the time of Jesus. The disciples were in awe of this man. He was obviously charismatic, he drew people to him, he demanded attention. His nature and his behaviour brought his followers to a belief that he was divine, he was God among them, both a wonderful and at the same time a terrifying thought. And then everything turned nasty. He was betrayed, he was condemned, he was crucified. What were his followers to think now? Were they mistaken? Had they been misled? Or were they missing something? They had to come to terms with the crucifixion and so they searched their Scriptures to see if there was an explanation for this apparent tragedy. And they hit on words from the prophet Isaiah – in particular words from Isaiah 53. Words like *'He was arrested and sentenced and taken away, and who gave a thought to his fate – how he was cut off from the world of the living, stricken to death for my people's transgression. He was assigned a grave with the wicked....though he had done no violence, had spoken no word of treachery.'* So somehow the death of Jesus was to be seen as a sacrifice for sin though there were several ways of explaining it.

Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth in around the year 57AD, proclaimed Jesus Christ, Christ nailed to the cross. What was he thinking of? Why did he think that proclaiming a man who had been crucified by the Empire outside Jerusalem could have any appeal to Gentiles? Perhaps we need to think about the powers who combined to have Jesus crucified. It was a combination of three powers. Firstly, there was the power of religion. The high priesthood in Jerusalem thought they had religion sewn up. They controlled access to the Almighty through the Temple, and they controlled the people through their interpretation of the Law. They found they could not control

Jesus with his wide appeal to the poor and the common people. But then there was the power of the people, the mob. There were undoubtedly people disappointed with Jesus as time went by. But in Jerusalem, stirred up by agitators, the crowds became a mob, a mob baying for blood. And over them all, officially in control, there were the Romans, representatives of the Empire, an empire built on the power of the sword, an empire whose peace was maintained with the sword or by the cross. Crucifixion was reserved for two categories of people: those who challenged imperial rule (violently or non-violently) and chronically defiant slaves. Crucifixion was a terrible, humiliating, painful death which carried the message, *Don't you dare defy imperial authority*. While the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had his misgivings, it was as a rebel, an insurrectionist that Jesus was crucified. Above his head was the inscription 'King of the Jews'. Kings could not be tolerated.

In a sense Jesus' whole way of life defied imperial authority as he was also seen as defying the authority of the High Priesthood. The Jesus way is different. He was not interested in political power, he was not interested in amassing wealth, he didn't care for status or position, he owned no property; in other words, he wasn't interested in so much that was, and indeed is, important to people. He cared for people, he reached out to the neglected, he touched the untouchables, he was simply there for people in need, he spoke of the love of God, he brought the love of God. As such, he was regarded as a dangerous rebel. But it is this alternative way that he invites us to share.

I am always fascinated by seemingly parallel situations – not exactly the same but having some similarities. For example I read this recently:

We, in alignment with our consciences and our reasoning, declare
Ourselves in rebellion against our government and the corrupt, Inept institutions that threaten our future.

That is a quote from the Declaration of Rebellion by Extinction Rebellion and it ends with the words, '**We act on behalf of life**'. Extinction Rebellion are criticised for their actions, and perhaps for their attitudes.



They are criticised by big business and by the Government, and indeed by people who are inconvenienced by their actions. I pass no comment on them but find an interesting parallel – here are people who are regarded as rebels because of their concern for life, the life of this planet.

Now this Jesus, whom Paul presents to the Corinthians as having been rejected by the powers of this world, calls people to his side, indeed calls them to identify with him; called Paul to identify with him. Paul, as we know, then known as Saul, was on the side of the powerful high priesthood. He persecuted the followers of Jesus until that day when the risen Lord stopped him in his tracks while on the road to Damascus. He was led, blind into the city where a saintly man, Ananias came and laid his hands on him so that he might recover and be filled with the Holy Spirit. In Damascus Paul learned about the faith and customs that were growing up in the developing church. He was baptised and, for him, this was a transformational experience. To the Christians in Rome he wrote, '*When we were baptised into union with Christ Jesus we were baptised into his death. By that baptism into his death we were buried with him, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might set out on a new life.*' To the Galatians he wrote,

'The life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me.'

So we are called to identify with, to share in the death of our crucified Lord. We put to death our sinful life to take up a life in Christ. That death becomes a portal, a door to a new experience. It

takes courage to take the step, to pass through the portal, to embrace a new life, but our Lord embraces us as we make the journey.

Let me share with you another parallel – not the same and yet not far removed. One evening, a few weeks ago I watched on television the film *Rocketman* – the story of the early life of Elton John. But, of course, he was not Elton John. He was born Reginald Dwight but when he wanted to progress in the music industry he had to change his name. He had already chosen the name Elton but when asked for a surname he glanced at a photo of the Beatles on the wall of his agent's office, saw John Lennon and chose the name John – Elton John. But there was a while during which there were problems deciding who he was. Was he Reggy Dwight or was he Elton John? Then someone said to him, 'You've got to kill the person you are to become the person you want to be.' It was a transformational moment.



Let me share with you one last picture. When I was last in London, actually for the celebration of 50 years of the United Reformed Church, I passed a sign on the pavement.



I passed it by but was intrigued, so later I Googled it to discover its story. Two young entrepreneurs who met at university got together with a five point plan to help ex-offenders. They got permission from the Home Office to start roasting coffee beans in a prison. They began by employing five residents, teaching them the practical skills of coffee making. They pay them above the standard rates for prison employment, with a portion of their wages set aside for when they are released. So they train prison residents to be baristas. They have extended this to train people deemed 'at risk of crime' and have set up ten coffee shops in London. John, one of their newly qualified baristas, has suffered twenty five years of addiction, has been sent to prison three times and three times to rehab. Now he has a new life. Ted and Max, the founders of the business are doing fantastic work, changing lives, changing attitudes. There is a more than one truth in their poster – Redemption served here. They are giving people a second chance.

Isn't that what Jesus does for us all? Through his death and resurrection he reveals God's fantastic love, he opened the door, that portal through which we may pass and in and through his church we may receive our training to enable us to live the life he gives. We need no concrete statue. This is the living Redeemer whose arms are forever outstretched in welcome.