

EASTER 2003

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 27th April 2003

“The resurrection of Christ is nothing more than a myth:
At best, a story with a spiritual truth;
At worst, a conjuring trick with bones cleverly performed by a magician.”

So runs one argument, which has been repeated in various forms throughout the centuries.

Don't worry – it is not my own argument, and April Fools' Day has long since passed.

But that sort of line, and others like it, surfaced early in the Christian Era. None of them try to push aside the facts of the death of Jesus, for those are attested to even by hostile historians of the time. Rather, they try to deal with the supposed disappearance of the body of the deceased man, Jesus.

At least some of them have a touch of humour. One suggested that Jesus, despite the gory experience of the cross, merely swooned. Once he was in the coolness of the tomb, despite having been embalmed according to elaborate Jewish ritual customs, he revived, pushed away the huge stone, walked past Roman soldiers set to guard the tomb, and then presented himself to a naïve world who thought he'd been resurrected. Very patronising as an attempted explanation!

Another suggested that the gardener of the cemetery became so annoyed with sightseers coming to look for the tomb and trampling his new plants, that he quietly removed the body to another tomb and started the talk about the resurrection.

Now, we haven't come here to listen to all these arguments, and I presume we share belief in Jesus' resurrection or else we'd not be here this morning to celebrate it.

The point is, many have set out to disprove the seemingly preposterous claim that somebody who died simply wouldn't stay dead! That claim still stands.

Many such people – including 19th and 20th C lawyers, philosophers, historians and scientists – set out to disprove what they felt they could not or would not believe. In the process they became convinced Christians as a result of coming to the same conclusions as the apostles who were eye-witnesses to these events.

As one of them says: “Christianity is an historical religion. It claims that God has taken the risk of involving himself in human history, and the facts are there for you to examine with the utmost rigour. They will stand any amount of critical investigation...”

Another, a former Chief Justice of England, (Lord Darling) said:

“We Christians are asked to take a very great deal on trust, the teachings, for example, and the miracles of Jesus. If we had to take all on trust, I for one would be sceptical.

The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was, or was not, what he proclaimed himself to be, must surely depend on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point, we are not merely asked to have faith. In its favour as a living truth, there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.”

(Quoted in J. McDowell: “Evidence that Demands a Verdict.”)

By all accounts, including hostile Jewish historical records, the resurrection had a profound and radical effect on people then as it continues to do so now.

Despite Jesus’ predictions of the event, the apostles hadn’t really believed or understood it even at the time of his death, and were fearful because of their association with this crucified man. They disbelieved the first testimony they received, from the women who first discovered the empty tomb. Nothing like this had even been heard or seen or experienced. They had to check for themselves.

And the Gospel writers, not trying to paint a glossy picture, capture all of this uncertainty and scepticism in their accounts, which are eyewitness accounts of what they saw and heard.

Thomas – with whom many of us readily identify – doubted right up to the moment he was confronted personally by Jesus who still had wounds from the crucifixion, which led him to acknowledge in awe: “My Lord and my God”.

These early disciples were emboldened by the fact of the resurrection, and would be even more so after the Feast of Pentecost. They were among the leaders of the believers in Christ, and a number of them were later persecuted and died for their belief. We know there are fanatics in this world, but not many will die for a cause that they know to be a fraud!

Instead, their convictions had given them a certainty of faith, as it did to thousands of other early disciples after hearing the message of Jesus’ resurrection preached to them by these eyewitnesses.

We, who are so familiar with the Easter accounts that we can become blasé about it, can also be renewed in our faith and worship with that same inner conviction of the fact of the resurrection. It leads to close friendship with God, it opens to us the transformation that he brings to us, and it gives us freedom from slavery to sin. When all is said and done – and lived – it also gives us assurance of an eternal friendship with God, not disrupted by the end of our physical lives in death.

Jesus frequently posed the question: “Who do you say I am?” We have to come to grips with that, whether we are an outsider to the Christian faith or a long-term participant in it. Despite all that we hold in common with other religions, it is resurrection that makes us distinctive.

We don't proclaim a religious system, or a philosophy on how to follow the Master and live a boringly good life. No, ultimately a Person confronts us: God, who became man, was crucified, who died, and who rose again.

In this Easter Season, our liturgy begins with the proclamation: Jesus is Risen – he is risen indeed – Alleluia!

As we continue now, with the renewal of baptismal promises and in the communion that itself is a celebration of Jesus' resurrection, we give him our own unequivocal answer: My Lord and My God! We ask for that same resurrection power to transform us and continue God's work in our lives.