

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Easter Sunday, 27 March 2016
Reverend Colin Dundon

EASTER

Introduction

There is nothing like finding the key part of a jigsaw: the piece that brings it all together and solves everything. Or, if you like detective novels, it's the search for the clue that makes sense of all those disparate and obscure clues that the author provides.

That is what it must have been like for the very earliest disciples. The startling nature of the resurrection of Jesus sometimes eludes because we have become so familiar with it. The puzzling nature of all that had gone before was quite overwhelming. All the promise that Jesus had shown in his life, especially the merging picture that he might be the Messiah was smashed to pieces with the crucifixion. It was as though someone had come along and thrown the pieces of another jigsaw on top of the one on the table. It was as though another author, with another plot had taken over writing the detective novel, with all new characters and clues.

In Jesus the story seemed to be emerging that God was about to forgive his people and set them free. It seemed that God was about to begin to reign on earth and bring peace and mercy to the world. And

then this – the powers of the world take over and brutally shatter the dream.

The disciples expect nothing.

All talk of resurrection is as remote from the disciples as could possibly be: once again sheer force has won. They come to mourn at the tomb. They do not expect freedom or peace now. They do not expect the forgiveness that would set them free. They expect to return to their ordinary lives to continue to wait for the Messiah to come.

So every account of the early morning resurrection stories reiterates the sense of the overwhelming loss of meaning and purpose.

In Matthew's story fear is the dominating emotion. Great noise of an earthquake as though the end of the world has come: Something so new, so powerful, that an earthquake is its best symbol. No one knows what to make of it.

The women flee. Yes they have joy but it is mixed with fear. The angel witnesses to resurrection but it is too much for mere mortals. The guards are struck comatose and the women dumb.

There are no words to express what has happened or what it means. They are incapable of witness. And this speaks to the truth of the story. No expectations, no words, no idea what is happening. (To the big question...)

John 20. 1-18 is particularly poignant. Mary comes to the tomb in darkness, the setting of unfaith. She does not believe that God has acted in any way in what she sees.

Instead she proposes a conspiracy theory; 'they' have taken the body away. She flees to Peter and the BD and includes them in her unfaith. 'We' do not know where they have taken him. 'We' and 'they' a dubious duo for understanding or seeing God at work.

Even as they visit the tomb one disciple seems to get it, the others don't. The tomb provokes unfaith as much as it provokes faith.

It is only on Mary's return that she starts to engage with the new realities that now confront her. She must let go the past; she must not cling to Jesus. The past is another country. Something has happened that has changed everything.

The big question is what have they found?

What they do not recognise was that they have found is the missing clue to the puzzle of the big question what is God up to with human beings? They had some vague pictures and pieces from their tradition. But nothing else.

Now all the pieces have a focus and centre. God is making human beings into new creations as glorious as this Man before their

eyes: Drawn into the godhead and divine life as is this glorious Man as this Man is drawn in.

What they find they will only be able express in borrowed language. The Lord is alive, not resuscitated to die again, but alive, a person we knew but different, recognisable but not quite the same: Bodily alive but different beyond comprehension. How is it possible? What does it mean? That would exercise their minds from then on and ours too right down to the present.

And yet on reflection it all fitted with the story. They did not understand the scriptures then but they soon recognised that this story made sense.

After all, they were not believers in a remote God who had wound the world up and let it go until would finally run itself down. And the world was certainly not God. They were not idolaters.

Heaven and earth were not the same but they sure came together in Israel's God. The Creator works and sustains the creation from within it creating marvellous overlaps of heaven and earth and the same creator shares its pain, taking it upon his shoulders.

What they found that morning they called resurrection. But it was very different from anything found in their scriptures. Daniel 12

came closest but there the resurrected would shine like stars, perhaps be stars even. Echoes of that still occur today.

What they came up with was a picture that said because God is at work always in the world, not taking holidays nor having a nap, and then what came out of the tomb was a new creation. It was like Genesis 1 all over again. Re creation has begun.

But could it make sense of Jesus' death?

Rejection/vindication

If the crucifixion was anything it was a profound rejection by the authorities of all that Jesus stood for. The human system of coercion and domination had killed him. God had raised him from the dead. That is the startling contrast.

God raised him. That is the confession of the earliest witnesses. God judges the system that puts Jesus in the tomb, gentile and Jewish. And it has nothing to do with ethnicity, but power, violence, hatred in any form. It is about who rules the world.

Someone has put it this way. "It is a simple no-yes pattern: Jesus' death was the domination system's **no** to what he was doing: Jesus'

resurrection was God's **yes** to Jesus. It is also God's **no** the rulers of this world'.¹

It is an old pattern in the Biblical witness. It is the conflict between the lordship of the dominating powers and the lordship of God. This is the fundamental clue to all that follows.

The defeat of the powers

In the language of the NT writers behind and among the rulers who put Jesus to death was another set of powers. They are variously called the principalities and powers, the elemental spirits of the universe, Satan, evil spirits, the prince of the power of the air and other designations. Within the worldview of the NT writers they are spiritual powers, which often become embodied in earthly institutions such as political and social powers.

These political and social and economic powers hold us in bondage. The truth of this language is that individually and collectively many things hold us in bondage. Things that are destructive and disintegrating in our lives.

Death was often considered to be the one great sign of that bondage. The power of death was not in its biology but in the fact that it destroyed the relationship with God. Death was the sign of our

¹ Wright and Borg, *The meaning of Jesus*, SPCK 1999, pp.137-8

bondage to other relationships of power, wealth, and loyalty other than to God.

Jesus was swallowed up by the powers. They got him; they held him.

But God says **no** and offers freedom from the powers.

A sacrifice for sin

The people of Jesus' day looked for forgiveness from God as a nation. They believed that their domination by the Romans was a sign that God had not forgiven them. Release from the powers was a sure sign that God had acted to forgive, to wipe the slate clean, to start fresh. Forgiveness was the foundation of both a new relationship with God and freedom from the dominating powers.

Jesus had broken the powers and thereby broken the power of sin to separate men and women from God.

God by an act of radical grace has taken care of whatever separates and alienates. In an act of unconditional acceptance God holds out an invitation for us to walk in the way of life.

Revelation of the love of God

All of these considerations lead us to see the pattern of Good Friday and Easter as the pattern and revelations of God's love. God is the divine lover. So deeply and powerfully does he love that he commits

himself to the most risky of all ventures. He will break the powers of alienation and coercion himself.

Revelation of the way

The cross and resurrection require from us a response. They are an invitation to come and be transformed. As Paul said when reflecting on this “I have been crucified with Christ”. The result of that is a new identity: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”.

In other words we are not left helpless spectators. We are lifted up, set on our feet, new breath put on our lungs and we are commissioned to go and make the new creation happen in this world.

The invitation for us is to engage the one who trod the path of crucifixion and resurrection. We are not simply nostalgic imitators of a long dead idealist whose moral outlook was no match for the powers of this world. In him we are a new creation.

And that is the way of dying to the old ways of living and being and being born into a new creation: new ways of living and being; of peace and mercy, justice and love, freedom and faithfulness, humility and truthfulness. In other words become genuine new creations in the image of the crucified and resurrected One.

Conclusion

We have trodden our Lenten journey and arrived at its end only to find an invitation to a fresh beginning. The risen Lord reviled yet vindicated, has broken that which binds, opened up a new relationship with God and lovingly offers an unconditional open invitation to be united with him in a journey that leads to the kingdom of peace, justice, love and truth.

Accept the invitation.