

# Grown-up Resurrection Faith

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Easter, 26 April 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-4, 11-18; 1 Peter 1: 13-25; Luke 24: 13-35

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I was talking to a young priest friend during the week, whose primary school-age daughter has been spending time with the atheist brother-in-law's children. And, Lo and behold, her response to dad's Easter greeting was 'dead people don't come back to life'. Her sceptical modern programming has been coming along nicely, thanks to the peer group. Already she's embraced rationalism, which places meaning under our control, and empiricism, which takes control of causality. So nothing's allowed to happen in the world without our say-so. Add individualism and utilitarianism, and you can ignore anything that's not about my self-interest narrowly construed. Social media completes the picture, ensuring that many children are going to grow up completely brainwashed. To think that dear old Richard Dawkins, thin-lipped and humourless as ever, blames religion for corrupting children's minds. And as if Christians imagine God living in

a suburb just outside the known universe, as someone once described the picture of God that Stephen Hawking congratulated himself on rejecting.

But, friends, our faith in God, our faith in Jesus alive among us beyond the power of death and evil, is anything but immature nonsense. It's all a lot simpler, a lot more real-worldy, but also a lot more personally involving than the sceptics insist. And all this is set out for us in today's Gospel, with its fateful encounter on the road to Emmaus. Here we see the how and why of actual faith, with powerful echoes in our other readings.

What we learn is that faith isn't an ideology, it's not a set of dogmas or moral instructions, it's not what the sceptics say it is. Instead it's about a journey of discovery taken in company, marked by a dawning awareness that Jesus is with us as our sensibilities and priorities are transformed. The world view of these travellers to Emmaus is challenged by the stranger who joins them on their journey, in their perplexity, in their disappointment, doubt and questioning. Clearly, the faith that escapes them is not far away. Their mental landscapes are reshaped by a deepening conversation with the authoritative world-view of their day, from the Old Testament, which is what all the Gospels set out to do. It's what we see Peter doing in our Acts reading. Indeed, it's what theologians are

still doing, challenging modern scepticism with a simpler if subtler postmodern account of how faith actually arises.

Crucial to that account of faith is participation in the Eucharist, which is surely the meaning of today's Gospel. Jesus' interpretation of the word on the road to Emmaus passes on to his offering and breaking and sharing of bread and wine, and in that moment the penny drops. The recognition of Jesus as Lord, as God at one with us and now as one of us with God, comes with a shifting perspective on life. It comes as we discern Jesus in the fellowship of his Church, in the preaching of his Gospel and in the personal mystery that we discern in the Eucharist.

But, friends, without being converted from stubborn delusions of autonomy and self-sufficiency we'll never see any of this. Hence the Church in our Acts reading this morning is presented as a converting Church to a theatrical extent.

This conversion means that new possibilities emerge, which we see set out in our Epistle today from 1 Peter. It's not that Christianity is about conventional morality, and about telling people what to do. Instead, with the Easter promise of seeing Jesus fully revealed the disciples' behaviour starts to change. They find themselves freed from old ignorant habits, and with new desires, modelled on the

holiness of Jesus: “you shall be holy, for I am holy”. And, friends, a clear mark of this holiness in our Epistle today is the encouragement of loving Christian congregations, which are indispensable for the making of Christians.

Here’s how faith takes hold, as something generous, transgressive, and unaccountably convincing begins to insinuate itself. All of this we’re invited to interpret as the risen Jesus Christ subtly revealing himself to us. It takes place as the apostles’ teaching reshapes our imaginations, which is the gift and task of creative theology and Gospel preaching. But that’s not enough without Christ’s gift of himself in the Eucharist, where we encounter something so saturated with meaning and personal agency that it outstrips rationalism and empiricism, let alone the imaginative confines of individualism and utilitarianism. This is Christian faith, resurrection faith, as it’s actually lived. It can’t be proven to the atheists’ satisfaction, but it can be entered into and found to be trustworthy. You may not argue a young girl into believing that a dead person can rise from the dead, but you can involve her in a community of people transformed by the shared conviction that Jesus is alive, nurturing their faith in word and sacrament. There she might just meet him, like those once-sceptical disciples did at Emmaus.

The Lord be with you ...