

## Homily - Easter Eve - 2020

Christ is risen Alleluia!

Every sermon preached by every Christian in the pages of the New Testament centres on this and that is - the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The message of the Apostolic church was the news that a man who claimed to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world had been crucified by the Romans in Jerusalem and that 3 days later he had risen from the dead and that as a result of this, a new age had dawned - the age of grace, of reconciliation with God. Everyone who believed in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who repented sincerely of their sins and who was baptised into Christ's Death and Resurrection was welcome to come home and begin living the new life of friendship with God.

One thing is certain, the consequences of Christ's resurrection are quite incomparable. One only has to compare the disciples before and after the resurrection of Jesus Christ to see the consequences of the Resurrection. Before, they ran away, denied their master and huddled behind locked doors in fear and confusion. After the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, they were transformed from scared rabbits to confident saints, world-changing missionaries, courageous martyrs and joy-filled travelling ambassadors for Christ.

Within less than 30 years, the proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ had, quite literally, flashed across the ancient world setting hearts on fire, changing lives and turning the world upside down. The message of the Resurrection had been carried by those very apostles and others to practically every part of the vast Roman empire and even beyond. We, with our western world view, so often conveniently forget that churches in north Africa and as far away as India, churches that still exist today, were founded by some of those very men who had been numbered amongst the 12 by Christ himself.

Today western liberal Christianity likes to down play the overarching centrality of the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus because, yes, it is hard for secular minds to believe that such a thing as resurrection is at all possible. Consequently, in order to, hopefully, make Christianity more 'acceptable' to the modern secular mind, the Resurrection has been reduced by not a few to being nothing more than a myth.

And what is a myth, you might ask? – a myth a story whose historical reality is of little or no importance – rather, it is a story, usually from long long ago, with an important

spiritual, ethical and social message. The myth, according to liberal Christianity, is the stories about Jesus in the gospels - His life, his miracles, his death and especially his resurrection. What is important, according to those who claim that much of the content of the gospels is myth, is – the loving loving compassion Jesus showed for others that lies at the heart of the stories about him that have come down to us in the New Testament. The message that resonates with modern man, so they would have us believe, is ..... ‘let’s be gentle, because Jesus was gentle, let’s be kind, because Jesus was kind; let’s be forgiving, because Jesus was forgiving; let’s be non-judgemental because Jesus was non-judgemental; let’s be for the poor, because Jesus was for the poor - and on it goes. In this ‘mythical’ approach to the gospels and the person of Jesus Christ, everything that is ‘difficult’ for the mind of a modern ‘enlightened’ person to come to terms with, is neatly sidestepped and that especially applies to miracles and the resurrection. Neither are important and the ‘Resurrection of Jesus Christ’ is reduced to a ‘feeling’ of the presence of God’s Spirit within the minds of believers. A feeling that enables us to be like Jesus in his ministry of loving compassion.

There is a certain attraction to this, and who can argue against the need to be gentle, kind, forgiving, non-judgemental and so forth? Nevertheless, the proposition that the resurrection is best put into the religious mythology basket fails completely for two reasons. First, there is no need for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ whatsoever if Christianity is all about a spiritual feeling of Jesus being present with us. Jesus could just as well have lived to a ripe old age, taught much more and then promised his followers he would always be with them in spirit before dying a loved, admired and revered teacher.

Secondly, the modernist approach is, to put it bluntly, completely at odds with Apostolic Christianity. What really mattered to the 12 Apostles, to St Paul, the 7 deacons and their successors?.... Proclaiming the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, from the dead after 3 days in the tomb, as a certain fact, is what mattered to them. The consequences of the Lord’s crucifixion and his bursting forth from the tomb 3 days later is what mattered to them. The forgiveness of sins given to those who sincerely repent and turn away from their sinful lives is what mattered. The incorporating of converts into the company of God’s redeemed people by Baptism is what mattered. A whole new relationship with God, with the hope of eternal glory through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is what mattered.

The earliest written account of the resurrection we have is found in St Paul's instruction to the Church at Corinth (Please read I Cor 15 before the sun sets on Easter Day). Paul was writing about 20 years after the Resurrection. Someone (we do not know who) had been to Corinth and was undoing St Paul's proclamation to the church that Paul himself had founded of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whoever that person was, they obviously denied that there was such a thing as the resurrection.

St Paul, in his inimitable style, puts the record straight, and in no uncertain terms. He could not be clearer ... hear him now...

Verses 3 – 9. *“I delivered to you what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brethren at the one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me.”*

You can bet your life's savings that Paul is NOT talking about a myth here, clearly he is talking about historical events that did take place and mentioning people who, for the most part, were still alive. Further on in this chapter, (verses 13 - 19) Paul puts the centrality of the fact of the Lord's Resurrection being the lynch pin of Christian faith beyond all doubt by saying....

*“If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.... We are found even to be misrepresenting God because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins..... those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men the most to be pitied.”*

There is no mythical language there either. Not a hint or suggestion of it. St Paul is adamant ... the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE central fact of Christian belief. The Resurrection of Jesus is the axis of history, the fulfilment of God's purposes, the completion of God's plan of salvation. Not one single word of the New Testament would have been written if Jesus Christ had not truly risen from the dead.

St Luke almost certainly wrote his gospel and The Acts of The Apostles prior to AD 70 and most likely prior to AD 65 or 66 when Paul was martyred by the emperor Nero. Luke makes it quite clear he was not writing myths and legends, quite the contrary, in his prologue to the gospel he declares that he has... *'written an orderly account so that the truth may be known'* and in the first Paragraph of the Acts of the Apostles he has this to say... *"To the apostles, Jesus presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking of the kingdom of God."*

Either one trusts the veracity of the Apostolic record and believes their testimony that the Lord God raised Jesus Christ up on the third day or one does not. The evidence is clear. There has never been a credible refutation of the Apostolic testimony. Indeed, dear people, the Lord is truly risen. Amen. Alleluia!

And now to him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time both now and forever. Amen.