

Easter Day Homily 2018

The joyful cry of the church is being heard all over the world today. Dear people, most of you know it well. Christ is Risen. Alleluia!! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!!

In the New Testament every single sermon that is recorded centres on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The 'good news,' of Christian faith is essentially the news that Christ is risen. The message that flashed across the ancient world from an obscure part of the Roman Empire, setting hearts on fire, changing lives and turning the whole world upside down was not 'love thy neighbour.' Every morally sane person already knew that. That was not the news. The news was that a man who claimed to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world and who had been crucified by the Romans for his trouble making had risen from the dead.

In a world where opinion polls rule the political and moral compass of much of human society, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not considered to be of any worth whatsoever. In fact, anyone who is not a Christian probably does not believe in the notion of resurrection let alone the resurrection of the man Jesus a strange Jewish teacher who was executed by the Romans nearly 2,000 years ago. Many do not even believe that Jesus really existed in the first place. Very commonly do we hear it said today that its all a fairy story made up to hoodwink the gullible and the credulous.

Unfortunately, there is not time in an Easter day sermon to fully answer that notion. Suffice to say, that whether you believe anything about the divinity and resurrection of Jesus or not, there is no doubt whatsoever that Jesus did live and die on a cross in Judea. His existence is well attested quite independently of anything that is said about Jesus in the Bible. So lets lay the fairy story nonsense to rest for a start. Jesus Christ is a real historical figure of history. Of that there is no doubt whatsoever. The fairy story is the story that he never existed.

What about resurrection though and the resurrection of Jesus in particular? It certainly is critical and central to the Christian faith. St Paul, who in Chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians gives us the most ancient written account of the resurrection, (see I Corinthians 15:3-12) goes on in verses 14 – 19 of chapter 15 to say this about the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to Christian faith

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain. We are even found 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, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins and those who have died in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied.”

With absolute clarity, St Paul knew that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE cornerstone and touchstone of Christian faith. Without it we have nothing to say whatsoever.

The claim of the apostles that Jesus rose again from the dead and the claim that this event was witnessed in a variety of ways by hundreds of eyewitnesses presents a fundamental challenge to every person who will have the courage to face any of the deeper matters of life. The resurrection challenges us to examine our belief in God. Is God something or someone real? Is God something or someone all powerful? Is God something or someone who's creative power has brought into being all that there is – time, matter, being, life and so forth?

If my faith in God is in a God who sort of started things off and who set everything in motion but who does not 'interfere' in the workings of the universe – it becomes very difficult to believe in the resurrection because resurrection from death challenges the notion of an 'absentee God' who is not concerned with our lives or existence. If my idea of God rejects any notion that God is in full and active control of the entirety of the universe, belief in the resurrection becomes all but impossible.

There is nothing new about these difficulties. In Acts Ch 17 we are told many Greeks laughed St Paul to scorn when he preached the resurrection of Jesus in the marketplace at Athens. There is no shortage of people who laugh us to scorn these days either. These days many who scorn the resurrection fondly imagine that modern atheistic writers like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have disproved the very notion of the existence of God, so quite obviously there cannot be a resurrection. They have done no such thing and, as any scientist worth his or her salt will readily admit, there is plenty of evidence for the existence of God and there is no advance of scientific knowledge that has disproved the notion of God whatsoever. Believers believe, on good grounds that there is a supreme being whom we call God. Atheists also believe that there is no compelling evidence. Either way it is a matter of faith (belief) not proof. Likewise, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is of the same order as belief in God. Finally it is a matter of faith, for the resurrection is a unique event that, like the being of God, lies outside the realm of rationality.

So, why do Christians believe in this unique event? Why is it the cornerstone of our faith? The short answer is usually twofold. Firstly, we believe because the evidence for the truth of the message of the apostles that Christ is risen is overwhelming, and it certainly is. Despite every attempt over almost 2000 years now to demolish the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a myth, a fabrication, a misunderstanding, a dishonest conspiracy, a communal hallucination; no real or credible alternative has ever explained the existence of the gospels, the origin of the Christian faith, the failure of Christ's enemies to produce a corpse, the empty tomb with the rolled away stone, or the post resurrection appearances of the Risen Lord to the disciples.

In that regard we can turn to St Paul once again and trust his testimony. Why would a man who had hated the infant church, persecuting its members to imprisonment and death, under go the following for the risen Lord if he knew or even suspected it was a lie? For his fervent faith in the resurrection Paul himself tells us:

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” 2 Corinthians 11: 24-27. The apostles are credible witnesses to the resurrection.

Secondly, we believe in the resurrection because we know in our own time people who we call saints. Their lives are powerful living proof of the grace and power of the Risen Christ poured out by the Holy Spirit on us in our baptism and confirmation and received in holy communion. I'd like to mention just one such person - a man of tremendous wisdom, great love, endless forbearance, tender gentleness, mighty courage, staunchly orthodox faith, sincere piety and infectious good humour. Many of you will have met him. I'm referring to Abbot Michael King OSB of blessed memory. May God rest his soul. He's certainly one of the reasons why I fervently believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. I could name many others of our time. So could you. In the life of the saints we celebrate the reality and the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ at work in every age.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is indeed the touchstone of our faith. We cannot reduce this event to a formula or a scientific principle. Nevertheless, we can trust the witness of those people of the apostolic age who were chosen to be the eyewitnesses to this unique event and we can trust the lives of countless holy men and women of the church through almost two millennia who have shown that the grace and power of the Risen Lord at work in the lives of faithful people does indeed make all things new.

St Paul deserves the last word today. The well known words from the Letter to the Romans (Ch 6: 9-10) joyfully come to mind:
Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.

Christ is Risen. Alleluia!! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!!