

THE RESURRECTION EASTER 2 2023

**ACTS 2.14a, 22-32
JOHN 20.19-end**

Throughout Lent, in the church where I was before coming to Woodbridge, we met one year to listen to a series of talks, in which representatives of different faith traditions gave us some insight into their view of death, bereavement and the afterlife. We heard from Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists.

What I found particularly interesting was how similar the attitudes are to death and what comes next. This is a bit of a generalisation, but it seemed to boil down to “well, we don’t know anything about the afterlife or even if there is one, and so we focus all our efforts on this life and making the best of it for ourselves, our families and communities”. Well, that’s fine, you might say – we Christians do so too. Isn’t that what being a good Christian is all about ?

The quick answer is: no, it isn’t – or at any rate it’s only half the story. Of course we want to have a good life, and we want to have the best for our families and if there’s time we want to do something for the wider community. But if that were all there is to Christian faith, then we might as well become Buddhists or Muslims, or belong to no faith at all. There’s plenty of choice.

I am not denigrating other faiths, by the way. They all have their own cultural origins and their own way of worshipping God or a Supreme Being, which we should respect. My point is that by calling ourselves Christians we are signing up to something very specific.

Christianity is not only a very specific religion, it is also a unique one – for two reasons: firstly it is centred on a human person, and secondly on that person’s death and resurrection.

The person concerned is Jesus Christ and was no ordinary human person. He was born of a female human being but through the agency of the Holy Spirit, as we know from the Christmas Gospel accounts. This means that he had both divine and human characteristics in wonderful combination, and the Gospel stories and parables bear witness to that. In effect, God sent himself into an unhappy world to teach it an important lesson – the lesson of love in all our dealings with each other and with his creation.

It is a powerful message, and one which we are still struggling to understand, two thousand years later. But if Jesus had died on the cross, followed by nothing further, what then ? Perhaps he would have been remembered as a prophet, who said some lovely things about fulfilling the Jewish Law and some outrageous things about being the Son of God. And that would have been that.

The unique, defining characteristic of Christianity is what we are celebrating here today: the fact, which is recorded in all the Gospels including what we have just heard from John, that three days after his physical death Jesus was resurrected from the dead and was seen by his disciples on numerous occasions. He gave them instructions and commissioned them to make disciples of all nations, and thanks to them we are doing what we are doing today.

So much for what happened. What does it mean for Christians, for us today ? Firstly, Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, the crucifixion of God himself in an ultimate sacrifice, signifies that our failings are forgiven if we show repentance. This is why every Christian service, including this one, contains a Confession and an absolution spoken in the name of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, his resurrection three days after his death proves that death is not the end of all things, that there is an afterlife, a further existence in which we shall see God in all his glory, we shall see our own loved ones once more, an existence which will be altogether more wonderful than anything we have known here on earth.

No other faith can make claims of this sort. We are uniquely favoured and privileged. This is why we have a great responsibility towards God not to keep this Good News to ourselves but to bear fruit and spread the Good News abroad, as Jesus commanded us to do, to our neighbours and to everyone we have anything to do with – whether at home, at work or at play, or wherever we are.

It also means that we are not to be triumphalist towards people of other faiths or none at all, but we are to be humble in our thoughts, words and actions. As we did on Maundy Thursday evening here, the example we have before us is that Jesus humbled himself before his own disciples, by washing their feet.

For the present we are entitled to rejoice in the Good News once more. We have come through the agony and sadness and kept a vigil for our Lord and Saviour. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it: “We look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God”. Now we can exult and cheer:

CHRIST IS RISEN !
HE IS RISEN INDEED. ALLELUIA !
12.4.2023