

Sermon for King's College Chapel

Sunday 27 April 2014

The First Sunday after Easter

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Dean

Alleluia! Christ is risen. So we said at the beginning of our service. But what do we mean when we say 'Christ is risen'? The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is one of the defining beliefs of Christianity, along with his divinity. Yet ask most Christians – most clergy – most theologians, I suppose – what exactly the resurrection *was*, and you're likely to be met with a somewhat embarrassed, shuffling silence.

Of course, anyone trying to address this from the pulpit can't but be aware of the difficulties and potential pitfalls. I need only to say the three words 'bishop' 'resurrection' and 'trick', and almost anyone of a certain age (mine or above) is bound to recall the fate of David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, routinely misquoted on this, and associated forever in the public mind with the fire that broke out in York Minster in 1984 three days after his consecration there – supposedly proof of divine wrath against this 'heretical' bishop. Jenkins is usually assumed to have said the resurrection was 'just a conjuring trick with bones', but in fact what he said was almost the opposite – nearer to 'not just a conjuring trick with bones'. And he certainly added 'The resurrection is real. That's the point'. What he was saying was entirely orthodox. But the press had a field day nonetheless.

The resurrection is a perplexing matter, however, even for the fully committed, and trying to give a rational account, let alone an explanation, of this most fundamental of Christian doctrines is a very risky matter. Well, here goes.

I imagine that what Jenkins was at pains to try to avoid was the common assumption that the resurrection of Jesus was or is a miracle like other miracles. Like Jesus's healings and exorcisms, like his raising of Lazarus from the dead, his own resurrection, it's assumed, was a miraculous reanimation of a dead body. Is this enough? Was it a miracle?

There are in the broadest sense two ways of accounting for miracle. The first, and probably most common, is the idea that a miracle is an event that goes against the

laws of nature, or is at least sudden and entirely unexpected. The healings in the New Testament are like this – the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed instantly. These are healings against the grain of natural expectation. There is a sudden, divine intervention, and the situation is changed in a way no one could have expected. This is the kind of miracle beloved of popular evangelists. It is a familiar enough trope in that kind of preaching, to describe a desperate situation – say the building of a much-needed new mission hall – at which the Lord’s followers have laboured hard, only to find that the deadline is looming and they are, say, £1,000 short of their target; so they pray desperately hard, and hey presto! What do they find dropping onto the doormat next day? A cheque for a £1,000. It is a miracle. The Lord has intervened. But ask yourself the question, Who signed the cheque?

And that’s a serious point. For even miracles in this sense – against the grain of nature, when it’s a healing, or a sudden, dramatic intervention - require physical things, cells that can be repaired, a voice that can be heard and ears to hear them with, an action that comes from some human agent. And though there are many apparently inexplicable things, it’s risky (for our knowledge is often partial) to assume that a miracle can only ever be something absolutely inexplicable.

That’s where the second common view of miracle comes in. According to this, a miracle does not necessarily involve suspension of the laws of nature, or even something sudden and entirely unforeseen, but rather an event or series of events or even a person in which we can say that God is especially active. God and nature work together. There is a special providence in things that may be explicable naturally, in strict terms, but which – perhaps in retrospect – look nonetheless extraordinary. Here are a few examples – the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa, the Good Friday peace process, modern ‘martyrs’ like Janani Luwum or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, people of courage in whom we might also perceive some exceptional divine inspiration.

The truth is that neither of these views really fits the resurrection, though there are elements of both in it. Even people who do not believe he was divine can often be heard to say that Jesus was an exceptional religious leader, a man of complete conviction and courage; it is not difficult for Christians to say that there was in him also a special divine initiative. And yet the resurrection also looks like an event against nature. But hold on – it’s not as easy as assuming the body was simply reanimated, or that the soul returned to the body, like a ghost going back. For the gospels make it very clear that the resurrection body was something different from a

dead body jolted back to life by the divine electricity – Jesus was not obviously or instantly recognizable, Mary did not recognize him in the garden, the disciples did not recognize him at first by the sea of Tiberias; he came and went, even through locked doors, in fact like a ghost; and yet his wounds were still fresh and tangible; and then of course he ascended, or disappeared from sight.

If a miracle, then the resurrection was not like other miracles. So what was it? It was a world-changing event, not so much an event contained in a particular time and place, but a nodal point in time which opens out into an entirely new future. It is not just a conjuring trick with bones. It is a change of gear in creation, a reworking of creation – in fact a new creation. God in Jesus Christ does not simply animate a dead body – he shows in the transformation of Jesus from death to life how the whole of creation is redeemed in him. Jesus's death and resurrection are the real Genesis of the world in which we now live – the beginning of the redeeming of all, a redeeming that works itself out in time, as we live and go about our daily lives.

And we are crucial in this. For the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only something done 'for' us, though it is supremely that, but in the end it is also something done in and through us, as the transformation of our world is effected by us too, as we are as Christians Christ's body, the Church. And the Church, for all its faults (which are very many) is a community of people committed to constructing a new kingdom of love and peace. It is a sign of hope beyond the hopelessness of death, and a commitment to build relationships of love in situations of bleakness and despair. So we all help to build that kingdom, and in *that* sense the resurrection of Jesus works in and through us.

And so we gather here, in this service, as a resurrection community, coming to the Lord's table not only to receive something for ourselves, but to remember together what God has done in Jesus Christ, and to go out from here nourished spiritually for our task in the world. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.