

## Easter Day

Acts 10.34-43; 1 Corinthians 15.19-26; Luke 24.1-12

‘God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead’.

This Easter we welcome James, Oliver, Tohid and Edmund into the full communion of the church and they will mark that by receiving Holy Communion for the first time. Easter Sunday is one of the four occasions of the year at which all faithful Christians should be present at the Lord’s table. I think we don’t reflect enough on this central act of Christian worship. Why when we have scripture, song, exposition, silence and prayer do we express our faith by coming out of our seats, holding open our hands and receiving food and drink together? Why this sacred meal? Perhaps we don’t understand enough the sheer physicality of our faith. Our Creed speaks of the Resurrection of the Body, not just of the soul, and the apostle Peter in this speech from Acts which is our first reading echoes accounts in the Gospels when he speaks of eating and drinking with Christ after he rose from the dead. Think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, or the breakfast of grilled fish by the sea of Galilee.

Adrian Gill the restaurant critic and quirky Christian wrote last week about the funeral of Rose Gray. She was one of the founders of the famous River Cafe restaurant. Her partner in that enterprise, Ruth Rogers, delivered an address in which she said that though in her final illness Rose had not been able to get to the restaurant she was in a sense always in there in the way they seasoned the lamb and ground the pepper in the mortar. And Gill went on to reflect on this:

We are all remembered and revitalised in food. Your grandmother’s recipes: the spoon in the caddy, the smell of cinnamon at Christmas, lemon and sugar on a pancake, the cup of tea left on the bedside table.... we are reborn in hunger and appetite, and the communion of shared food.

Faith, too, is reborn in food and drink. I certainly can’t repress the sheer sensual delight of spicy hot cross buns after fasting through Good Friday, or the silky chocolate of the Easter egg, or the first gin and tonic, forbidden through Lent. This can sound trivial but something profound is going in these sensual memories. Adrian Gill went on to say:

We pass on not only those we remember but those we never knew, everything you put on the table comes in a line from your heritage and your culture, passed from hand to mouth, generation to generation. We don’t see dead people, we eat with them.

I think that is why at the Eucharist we are always reminded of the angels and saints, of our forebears in faith, of our parents and grandparents. For a thousand years people much like you and me have come to this altar and heard the same words of Jesus at the Last Supper and have eaten and drunk with their neighbours and friends and those they didn’t like much but knew as fellow Christians. Here we are with Benedict, with Francis, with the apostles and apologists of the early church, with the saints and martyrs of the Reformation, with the Victorians who commissioned our windows with all the clergy and people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose names are still inscribed in our register of baptisms. And the host of this meal is the one and the same host, our Lord Jesus Christ who welcomes us today as he welcomed them. Christ yesterday, today and forever.

This Easter Eucharist then, is a memorial meal, and the Eucharistic prayers that are said day by day and Sunday by Sunday state this over and over again: ‘We make the memorial of Christ your Son our Lord’. ‘We celebrate this memorial of our redemption’. In the meal of the Eucharist at Holy Communion, we are reunited with those from the past, the dead meet us in the present time.

But there is of course more than that. The Eucharist does not only look back, it also looks forward. The Christ who is the host of this feast is the Christ who died on the cross, the Christ who was buried in the tomb, but he is not a dead martyr but a living Lord. And he calls us not only to remember the past but to anticipate the future. 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again', or as we shall sing today, 'Dying you destroyed our death' – that is in the past, 'Rising you restored our life', and here we are alive in the present, 'Lord Jesus, come in glory'.

The Christ who will come calls us from the future, from our destiny. 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied', says St Paul. Christian faith is not a therapeutic mind game just to help us struggle through this life, and then we die and it doesn't matter anyway. It is a faith born in and of a material world. 'In fact, Christ has been raised from the dead' says Paul, 'the first fruits of those who have died'. Christ's resurrection is not something which happens only to him. He is the first fruits, the early crop; we, with our forebears and with those who come after us, we are the rest of the harvest.

Just as Christ's body is transformed in the resurrection so is this body of the Church transformed by his resurrection. We are eating and drinking that resurrection life with Christ today. This rather tasteless wafer of food and sip of wine, are to us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being'. As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive'. And the emphasis there is on the all. We eat and drink in a future where the hungry will be fed and the violence that wrecks our world will be the energy of peace and justice. The resurrection of Christ embraces the whole of creation; all matter, all energy, all creatures are made for glory. And this taste and sip are the foretaste of all that. And that is where death is also transformed. 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death', says Paul.

Most of us believe three contradictory things about death. First we believe that it is the end. That is observation. That is common sense. The heart stops, the brain dies. There is a death certificate and a funeral. But then, second, we also believe that in some way the dead are still around. We remember them, and perhaps we sense that they are in some way with us, in our dreams and thoughts. Hence our memorials, our meals, the taste or smell that floods us with memories.

And then, third, breaking into all the fear and sorrow and mystery that we feel around death, there is this trumpet call of hope. 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen!' We were reflecting this week on the Fra Angelico paintings in the monastery of San Marco in Florence. One of the most remarkable is that of the resurrection – with the women peering hopelessly into the darkness of the empty tomb while the risen Jesus looks down on them. He is already risen, already in the future of the world, already in the personal future of every one of us. He is in that future whatever else it holds of trial and temptation even if we face failure, disaster and ultimately death, he is there ahead calling us on from glory to glory. We eat and drink to eternal life.

So we can say to James, Oliver, Tohid and Edmund, 'Welcome to the Lord's table'. And also, in a profound way as we contemplate the Easter mysteries: 'Welcome to the human race'.