

Dawn Service Homily

This time last week I was wandering around Jerusalem. We had walked the Via Dolorosa concluding our journey at the church where all Christian pilgrims end up - in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Although pilgrims and tourists were right down this year, due to covid and the very recent heightening of tension between the Israelis and the Palestinians, nevertheless, there were a fair number wandering around. It's actually one of the few holy sites in the Holy Land which has quite a strong claim to historical authenticity. It is actually quite possible that it's built over the site of the crucifixion and of Jesus' tomb. And so we call it the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Orthodox Church by contrast, refers to it as the the Church of the Resurrection. There is a rock beneath an altar which you can bend down and touch and pilgrims queue to do just that. It's possibly the rock of Calvary. It is possibly, the place where Jesus died. And since that church may well cover the site of Jesus entombment as well, here could be the place where he rose from the dead, the site of his resurrection.

But can we really talk of a 'site' of resurrection? I know what crucifixion means; if I dare to think about it, I can imagine what it entails; I can picture the horror of it. I could step on to the rock of Calvary in that church (or i could if that altar hadn't been there). But we cannot step on the ground of resurrection. Resurrection takes me beyond place, beyond time, beyond anything that can be fixed or pinpointed. Resurrection cannot be spoken of plainly - it takes us beyond our understanding. We find ourselves groping for words, for images to convey something of what is meant; or else like the author of Mark's gospel, we fall silent and stop as if in mid sentence when we reach the women running in terror. Somehow it seems to belong to another realm altogether, a realm beyond death, that we don't yet know, a realm where all is God and of which we gain only a tiny glimpse now. We shouldn't be tempted to reduce this great mystery, this earth shattering, rock piercing joy to something we can get our minds around, or step upon with our sweaty pilgrim feet. God deliver us from such arrogance.

Peter Abelard was a twelfth century theologian and philosopher. Although he was condemned to death as a heretic he is now considered one of the greatest thinkers of his time. In one of his stories he reflects on the cross of Christ. In it, he and his companion stumble across a rabbit caught in a trap, struggling to break free, but finally giving itself over to death. Abelard looks at the little body, then at the fallen tree beside him and says to his companion,

'You see this tree. You only see the rings where it has been cut across. That's Calvary. But the rings go up and down the whole length of the tree'.

His friend considered his words carefully and then said slowly, 'so you think that all of this,' he looked down at the little quiet body of the dying rabbit in his arms, 'all the pain of the world, was Christ's cross?'

'Yes, God's cross, 'And it goes on.'

But what then of resurrection? Might not the bright rings of resurrection extend through the whole length of the tree trunk also? Might the resurrection of Christ point us not so much to what was, one particular morning, but to what is, and has been and always will be? Might it also, like the cross, show us the way of things? Life has an astonishing way of coming out of death. Good has a remarkable way of coming out of evil. When that happens, then we surely trace again the bright rings of resurrection.

This last week in the Holy Land I was privileged to listen to two men who were part of the Bereaved Families Circle: Yigal Elhanan and Arab Aramin - one a Jew and one a Palestinian. At a young age, both had lost their older sisters to violent deaths: Yigal's sister had died when a bomb exploded in the cafe where she was sat with friends; Arab's older sister died when an Israeli sniper shot and killed her whilst she was playing outside her home. Both men felt bitterness and rage and wanted revenge. And yet the parents of both men wanted to understand, wanted to learn to stand in the shoes of the other; wanted to listen. They formed the 'Bereaved Families Circle' and now some 20 years on, their children Yigal and Arab travel around Israel/Palestine speaking together of their experiences, of what they have learned, how they want to break the cycle of violence and work for a just peace for all. And during lockdown, they had a conference on zoom - 20,000 Palestinians and Israeli's tuned in. The movement is growing.

We may not be able to stand on the place of the resurrection 2000 years ago but resurrection, paradoxically, is the very ground on which we stand, it is the very air we breathe. Always, everywhere is resurrection. We have a God crucified and risen. Not crucified then risen, nor just crucified, but crucified and risen. Resurrection is the way things are. Even in the Holy Land, even in Ukraine, even in Yemen, even in this place, even in you and me. It is deep, deep down, the way things are. It means that brutality and hatred and ignorance can never, will never

have the last word. It means we must never lose hope, and it means that if we do, our hopelessness cannot be the end. It means, as the Hebrew love poet reminds us, that love is as strong as death, that many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. That is the way things are and always have been and always will be.

Yes we are an Easter people and our song is Alleluia!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Dilly Baker, Rector