

Easter morning 2017

“When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

- Colossians 3.4

I don't know how it started, but when my children were quite small I used to offer them little pieces of sage advice as they left for school each morning. Sometimes it was just some silly motto or saying, and sometimes a verse from scripture. A favourite was Proverbs 6.6.: ‘Go to the ant thou sluggard and learn to be wise.’ I'm sure that to this day it is the one bit of the Bible they absolutely know by heart. But over the years, one little saying came to encapsulate all of them: I would say to them as they left for school: ‘Remember who you are.’ And this maxim began to carry a whole hinterland of meaning: remember the values that shaped you; remember what matters in life; remember that you are loved, that you are precious.

Remembering – who you are, where you came from and where you belong – are also very important for the Christian tradition. Remembering for us is not passive recollection, dragging from the cobwebbed depths of memory some event from yesterday, but an active bringing into the present, each day and each moment, the things that really make us who we are.

The central event of the Christian faith – no, more than that, for us Christians, the central event of human history – the thing we must recall – is the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From this event we read and understand life and history, and our place in it, backwards and forwards.

We read backwards to hear how human beings fell from grace, turned from the many covenants and possibilities God offered then, turned from who they were meant to be by continually choosing their own path to what they could become if they followed the pathways of God: and in this story of what our forebears did and didn't do – what Christians call the Old Testament - we also see our own shortcomings. For we too choose what we know to be wrong, act for ourselves, turn from what we know to be good and form what we could become.

But we also read forwards, discovering how an infant church, formed by the impact of the Resurrection of Christ and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, became a new humanity and turned the world upside down and established values and ideas that we so take for granted nowadays that we forget who we are and our roots in the person of Christ and the establishment of the Christian faith. So, for instance, the idea that people have rights just because they are human, and entirely irrespective of merit, isn't derived from observation of the world. There may be much to learn from the industry and collaborative enterprise of ants, and, yes, the created world is wonderfully balanced and harmonious, but it is also fiercely competitive – the nature ‘red in tooth and claw’ that Tennyson warned of. In this bloody world the weak suffer and die.

Nor was human society before Christ any place where those who were deemed inferior, superfluous or alien had any standing at all. The idea of human rights, now enshrined in our laws, customs and institutions arose out of Christianity. It didn't happen overnight, but it did happen because Christian people remembered who they were and allowed themselves to be shaped by Christ. Brooding upon his Word, we were able to discover another way of being human and therefore another way of inhabiting the earth.

Ironically, for us, at the same time that these rights have become embedded in our institutions, religious observance itself is in decline. At least in the Church and in the West, that is. But make no mistake about it, it was the Christian faith that brought these values to the world, and as the rise in

nationalism and populism across the globe, and with it a rise in xenophobia and isolationism, illustrate, it is by no means certain that they can survive in a post-Christian world. As the collective memory slips from the old moorings of a Christian ethic rooted in the observance of the Christian faith, we forget who we are, and that which seems obvious to the Christian worldview – that we must love our neighbour as ourselves, that we must lead lives of joyful service – seem absurd to a world which is intent on building the very walls and divisions that Christ came to roll away.

One of the oldest texts in the Bible is Deuteronomy chapter 26 verse 5. Biblical scholars reckon that the phrase you find here – ‘My father was a wandering Aramean’ – was one of the very earliest confessions of faith of the Hebrew people. They were remembering their father Abraham and their father Jacob and the nomadic life before their exile in Egypt; and they were remembering their sojourn in the desert. By looking back into their past they re-assert their identity as the people God has chosen.

The oldest texts in the New Testament do something similar. In one Corinthians 11, Paul begins that passage which tells of the institution of the Eucharist on the night before Jesus died by saying "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..." (1 Cor. 11. 23) Taken that this letter was probably written in about AD 53, i.e. only about twenty years after the death of Christ, it is astonishing to learn that a tradition is already so established that Paul does not consider himself qualified to interfere with it in any way: he simply passes it on, repeating the formula that he himself has learned and been schooled in.

There are other similar texts which biblical scholars believe were in existence as confessions of faith and hymns of praise even before some of Paul's letters were written. Texts like Philippians 2.6-11 which Paul interestingly introduces by saying that we should have “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2.5)

But supremely it is the Eucharist itself that defines us as the people of God, the new Israel. In the Eucharist we remember who we are by remembering who Christ is and what he has done for us. It is an acted parable in which Jesus gives us a way of understanding the meaning of his death - his body broken and his blood shed. It is an encounter, a solemn remembrance whereby that which Christ did in the past breaks into the present, because the one who died upon the cross has been raised to life.

As the gospels tell us, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was still dark. She went to anoint a corpse. She was not expecting anything else. She found the tomb empty. She fetched Peter and John, and none of them really knew what was happening. Lingered by the empty tomb, her heart as broken and laid bare as the tomb itself, she encounters the risen Lord and she recognises him when he speaks her name. And this risen Lord is known to the disciples at Emmaus when he breaks bread with them. He has breakfast on the beach with his disciples. And in the Eucharist, under the form of bread and wine, we too feed on and share in the fruits of his victory over sin and death.

The bread and wine of the Eucharist are not the flesh and blood of a soon to be rotting corpse, but neither are they mere symbols representing something they cannot ever be: they are sacraments, visible and tangible signs of the grace they communicate which is nothing less than the risen life of the Lord Jesus Christ who in his earthly ministry said to us that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood there can be no life in us (see John 6. 53).

In the Eucharist we share in the resurrection of Christ; we are formed and sustained as the people of God. It is the rations for our journey here on earth until that day when we see the Lord face to face. It is a life-giving encounter with Christ. We hear him speak to us in the words of scripture. We feed on

his risen life in the sacramental signs of bread and wine. We share fellowship together as members one of another within the body of Christ (and this is why it is not ours to choose who should be in or who should be out) and we are commissioned – sent out – to bring God’s peace to the world.

As ever that peace is under serious threat. In trivial ways that just go to show the measure of religious illiteracy in our culture and the size of the challenge before us to share the knowledge and peace of Christ in our world, like Cadburys forgetting to mention today was Easter, or Tesco's flogging cheap beer under the strapline ‘Good Friday just got better’; and in extremely serious ways like the chemical attack in Syria last week, Donald Trump dropping the horrifically titled ‘mother of all bombs’, in Afghanistan, North Korea flexing its nuclear muscle; or the huge challenges of climate change that are a direct result of our success in colonising the planet and the lifestyle expectations that all of us gathered here this morning take for granted.

We are sent out by the risen Christ to share the message of Easter joy, which is not only the message that there is life beyond this life, but the great biblical vision that the resurrection of Christ is not so much the promise that we go to heaven, but that in Christ *heaven comes to us* and we are called to work with God to make that petition in the Lord's prayer that we say each day real: your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Remember who you are!

+Stephen
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