

**Sermon**

Sunday 18 April 2021

Lesson

St Luke 24: 36 – 48

In art, mosaics comprise of regular and irregular pieces of stone, glass, ceramic or shell, in which each piece is an anonymous fraction of the design but, when we stand back, we see the mosaic's beauty and the image or 'truth' it reveals. Mosaics around the world are some of humanity's greatest treasures. For me, Resurrection stories are a mosaic: each detail in the story is, if you like, an anonymous piece but, when we step back, we 'see' the Risen Christ; we experience the mystery of faith.

There are many pieces in the Resurrection mosaic. In the Gospel of Luke, the Risen Christ said, 'Peace be with you!' Standing among the disciples, He asked, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet'. In the Gospel of John, He said much the same to Thomas. Back to the Gospel of Luke, on the Road to Emmaus the Christ walked with Cleopas and his friend, *unrecognised* until Jesus broke bread with them. In

Matthew's Gospel, Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee, not Jerusalem. He stood among them: some worshipped Him, while others doubted. Again, in John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene spoke with the Risen Christ but thought Him to be the gardener, and the Beloved Disciple gazed into the darkness of the empty tomb and believed. Lots of quite different pieces, but what of Paul?

In his own words, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said that the Risen Christ had appeared to Peter, the twelve disciples, to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, to James and, finally, to Paul himself. In the Book of Acts, Paul was dazzled by a light from heaven, from the sky; dazzled to the point of blindness. Those who were with him saw nothing. Paul's account of 'seeing' the Christ was written between 20 and 50 years *before* the Gospels. In our Resurrection mosaic, when we stand back, what do we 'see'?

I wonder if faith, a sense of resurrection, of immortality now, is a lived experience? Last week, the Duke of York said that the Queen

had described the death of Prince Philip, his passing, as ‘a miracle’. The Countess of Wessex said, ‘It was just like someone took him by the hand...’. Faith is a way of ‘seeing’ the world.

If we focus in too closely on the details in the Gospel stories, the sheer physicality of the Risen Christ reduces Him to a resuscitation of the flesh. Faith is an experiential ‘seeing’, not a physical ‘seeing’: it is ‘seeing’ with the eye of the heart, the soul. Through his persecution of the first Christians, Paul ‘saw’ the Risen Christ in those believers. In time, Paul came to ‘see’ Christ in the cosmos, in the very flesh of the universe. At times, we are so readily inclined to read the Gospel resurrection stories as science, as provable statements, when, in fact, they are experientially true. Penned in the imaginative language of the day, they are moments of encounter. We are to place ourselves in the stories, and ‘see’ the Risen Christ ourselves: be present to the Presence. For the early saint, Symeon, resurrection meant union of the soul with God.

In our Gospel lesson today, we read of the Risen Christ eating broiled fish. If 'fish' is a symbol rather than literal reality, what might it signify? In the Jewish tradition, in their new year festival of *Rosh Hashanah*, fish is on the menu. In prayer, Jews desire that they be fruitful and multiply 'like fish'. Does mention of fish suggest that the first followers of Jesus are to make disciples of all nations, to multiply the number of followers? For some in the Jewish tradition, the fish symbolises the Great Leviathan, the sea monster of the Hebrew Bible, on which the Israelites will feast for eternity in heaven. Does mention of fish in the Resurrection story point the followers of Jesus to God's nearer presence?

If we close our eyes and enter the story, may we also eat with Jesus? Is the Resurrection story a hint at Communion, of feasting with God? Perhaps our gathering together in community, our listening to Scripture, our stillness in prayer, our love of hymn-singing, our elation at the organ, and our appreciation of this beautiful sanctuary amount to 'eating fish' with Jesus. Mystically, mysteriously, Christ is alive in us. The early Church Father, Tertullian, described

Christians as ‘little fish’ because we are born in water, the water of baptism.

According to *Open Doors*, the Netherlands based charity which records and measures the persecution of Christians around the world, it is said that some 340 million Christians face some form of persecution. Simply for being in a church, for believing in God, for reading the Bible and listening to Gospel stories, millions of Christians are persecuted. Thousands of Christians are killed each year for their faith. Many oppressive countries are in Africa, but the worst is North Korea. Others include China, India and Turkey. In China, *Open Doors* says that Christians can only attend state-approved churches and that facial-recognition systems are in place. Crosses in sanctuaries have been replaced with pictures of President Xi. In some countries, Christians have been denied COVID-related aid.

St Paul ‘saw’ the Risen Christ in the Church, in the Body of Christ. With the eyes of faith, the Risen Christ is ‘seen’ here today in us, in

this gathering. If that is true for us, it is surely doubly true of Christians who are persecuted, tortured and murdered because they utter the name of Jesus.

What does resurrection mean for you? In your soul, do you have a sense of a loved one departed, a friend or companion? On occasion, do you hear them speak? Do we feel their presence? Are the pets we have loved held also in the love and embrace of God? Dare we trust our spiritual intuition? Whether or not we have had any experience of another dimension of life, for me, the stories of the resurrection suggest that the Mystery we call 'God', the Mystery we believe to be Love, the Mystery which underpins the whole of the universe – all of reality, holds us now and for always. The great Edinburgh preacher of last century, Leonard Small, said that he did not believe in the resurrection of the flesh. Provocatively, he asked, 'What would resurrection of the flesh mean to a miner who had lost a leg in an accident?' No, said Small, God sustains our individuality. We are creatures of consciousness, of love, and it is this, this essence, that God holds and uplifts. In time, St Paul came to 'see' Christ, to

see the love of God, in everything. The apostle spoke of being ‘in Christ’. Every day he lived ‘in Christ’. It is a spiritual reality, a spiritual truth.

This is what I see when I gaze into the Resurrection mosaic. What do you see?

Amen.