

20200409 For Easter Sunday

I think it was the well-known radio presenter Sir Terry Wogan who had a regular dig at published scientific research that seemed to report on the really very obvious; no doubt he was wondering why plainly common sense things needed the rigorous scientific treatment at all. Let's call such things, the 'Woganly obvious'.

So perhaps I need not have a good excuse to speak about the Woganly obvious on Easter Sunday, to speak about the Resurrection. Yet equally perhaps I should dance around it rather than address it directly, as some appear to do, as we shall discover.

Our Acts reading is fascinating, because although some of the Gospels and this particular chapter of the book of Acts were written perhaps 20 or more years after the events they describe (although in the case of Acts one imagines the later chapters were written-up very soon after the events themselves), the way that Peter reports on the Resurrection is as someone summing-up the overall effect on himself. When Peter went to the house of Cornelius he was giving them a summary of what it had been like for him personally, walking about with Jesus for those three years.

As such his reported speech has a very different flavour, to say the Gospel accounts, which of course set-out to relay precisely what happened from the perspective of the writer or the writer's own witnesses.

The sequence of events in Cornelius' house as Peter spoke is also very revealing. Peter tells his hearers about Jesus and his customary actions of 'going about doing good' as our Acts reading mentions. Peter is careful not to insult the Roman associations of his host and speaks of the Crucifixion as being 'from a tree' rather than for example saying, 'Jesus was crucified in the manner as you know you Romans do'.

That is in itself interesting because Peter is starting to understand that people and their physical heritage or associations or birth-family (because of course Cornelius might have been a so-called foreign auxiliary rather than an Italian Roman, in spite of his name), that such things are of lesser importance than the choices they make as they come to faith. Cornelius is about to make the move into an entirely new set of allegiances and into an entirely new family and nation. He is about to become one of the family of Abraham according to faith, rather than of the family of Rome.

All this reminds us, that when we come to faith in Christ, we are no longer 'from' where we are 'from', we are now 'from' somewhere else; we are now a traveller, a 'passer-through life', we are now looking to a different and eternal future. This both places each of us upon the same foundation and levels-up our 'from-ness'; something we need to hear I suspect. Of course some will hear that as an affirmation of equality, whereas actually it is a call for each of us to become all that God wants us to contribute to, to be in service to, the new eternal Kingdom in Christ.

So Peter, having given this synopsis of Christ's earthly ministry then drops the real spanner: Christ's death was not the end. Up to now he had been warming his audience up with talk of a 'Good Man'. Now he changes gear and is talking of someone else entirely. Jesus is no longer just a Good Man, he is declared to be divine.

What did Peter think he was doing in Cornelius' house? Surely, he is simply doing as the Holy Spirit told him. Peter has no idea what is going to happen and had no idea of why he was told to go there. Peter's ministry is so very much a pattern for our own. From day-to-day we have no idea who we are going to meet, who the Spirit will put in front of us, indeed of what is going to happen. But Peter was ready; ready for the exceptional; ready for great things. And we must surely be too; every day, even though like you one does not always feel at one's best and days today are in themselves somewhat exceptional.

But Peter does his thing. He keeps going with his account of what it was like to be around Jesus.

I was reminded during the week of how I should act and how I should not. I was listening to the 'Thought for the Day' slot on Radio 4. The senior CofE person was speaking about the 'stories' of Christ's Resurrection. I wonder whether in a few months time we will be talking about the 'Story' of the Corona virus. I imagine we might talk about individuals' 'stories' of how they coped, but the history of the virus will be spoken of in terms of 'accounts'.

Dare-one-say it, I suspect the CofE person was perhaps a little ashamed to talk about the Resurrection on Radio 4.

The Apostle Paul spoke to his own world and the popular view then of the Resurrection, as well: he said in the opening to the Epistle to the Romans, that he 'was not ashamed of the Gospel' because it has within it God's Power to transform individuals through Christ's salvation; it is God's exceptionality for each individual, who is called by Jesus towards himself. Paul obviously needed this to be said, needed to say what was Woganly obvious to him.

But back to our account: and Peter continues as he speaks to Cornelius' household and as recounted in our Acts reading from today, as you might expect him to, with what came next: Jesus came back to life. He was not ashamed either, to tell of the Woganly obvious. He was not ashamed because he knew it is God's Power of exceptionality. And then of course the exceptional happened, as our Acts reading would have told us if we had been allowed to read-on another verse or two.

The Spirit came powerfully upon those listening to Peter and they all came to faith as Acts reports, 'speaking in other tongues and praising God'.

The sequence of the Acts account is both instructive as it is obvious: it was only after Peter had reported Christ's Resurrection, that the Spirit came on those who were listening, in Cornelius' front room. I don't suppose for a second that there was some deep theological and medical exposition of the nature of the Resurrection. None of those present any more than we can

today, would have known or understood or indeed even have cared, precisely how the Resurrection took place and how Jesus came back to life. Yet what is overwhelmingly plain, is that the fact of it having been reported and accepted was what then occasioned the coming-to-faith of those present.

So apologies for a very obvious message on this Easter Sunday, but hopefully one that is just that, hopeful, for it would seem that as we too are witnesses to Christ's Resurrection, a Resurrection in which as Peter reports, Jesus ate and drank with them, had conversations with them and held teaching sessions, others too will come to know this Jesus who transforms lives into ones of loving service towards those he places us amongst.