

The Year of the Word: Reflection 9

Jesus is Lord!
Death could not hold Him
He is risen
And He is Alive!

hopeful
curious
wise
grateful
discerning
compassionate
active
truthful
loving
prophetic
faith-filled
generous
eloquent
intentional
attentive
learned



What is the message of the Resurrection?

The words of the mysterious figures at the empty tomb that declare that Christ 'is not here', and ask 'why do you seek the living among the dead?' give us insight into what was asked of the disciples at the time and a clue as to what is being asked of us today: They were called to be witnesses, just as we are called to be witnesses to a work already accomplished; it requires us to change how we understand our world and its possibilities. It is God's work done, not in some flash of blinding glory, but when no one was looking. It is a person, the Risen Christ, flesh and blood, truly God and truly man. It is God's love freely given, bringing us freedom.

So the Resurrection is a work which changes everything, even the way in which we now know God: No longer a detached and aloof deity: Not one person in God but three; God the Father who raises up his Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit – the Trinity. God made man and the Trinity's life laid bare in order to offer us a new life, a new way of being and seeing, and calling us to a moment of decision. Everything is changed – the ancient struggle against the finality of death in all its forms is finally resolved in the triumph of life, the reality of the Risen Lord. With His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus opens for us the limitless horizon of God's own life. This is why the Resurrection, while it happens in time, is not bounded by it: 'Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, all time belongs to him...' (Rom. 10:9; Phil 2:11; 1Cor 12:3). Are we willing to profess this as our faith?

Reading the Gospel Accounts of the Resurrection may help us understand better the beautiful strangeness of the Risen Christ and the impact He has. There are differences of detail and emphasis in each of the Gospels, which reflect the concerns and styles of the different writers, but there is also a surprising transparency – the fear and even disbelief are not disguised; the disciples are not portrayed as heroic men who are utterly reliable; the testimony of women is allowed, which would have not been accepted as valid in Jewish law. All the accounts of Jesus' appearances show remarkable restraint. All record fear and confusion and failure to understand, however also there is a consistency about the Jesus encountered. His appearances are not triumphant manifestations but oddly low key and intimate. They are not hallucinations, nor are they like the transfiguration; all are clear that the Resurrection is not resuscitation like that of Lazarus, or Jairus's daughter or the boy at Nain. Jesus is alive, in the total integrity of His body and soul; He bears the marks of His suffering and crucifixion, He can be touched, He can eat, He speaks and consoles – He is very much alive! Yet He is strange, His body inhabits time and space but is not bound by them; in some sense it is 'physical' but it seems to have properties which we have never experienced or seen before – Scholastic theologians referred to them as 'agility, clarity, immunity from pain and decay, absence of density', while some modern scholars speak of a 'transphysicality'.

Many of the Gospel accounts of the appearances seem bathed in light. This delicate but uncanny luminescence is not just the freshness of the morning light, it is the glory of God's Kingdom breaking upon us. Slowly, as with the disciples, in this light of glory, we adjust to a new way of seeing and of understanding – a new way of being. The Risen Christ has to re-teach us and go on re-teaching us, not only because we resist or are slow learners, but simply because of the mystery which we encounter – we can't hold it all at once or for very long. This is why the Resurrection is always about the Spirit who continues to teach us and the community which continues to hold the truth for us. The Resurrection is a vocation; a call, the giving of a mission to follow the Risen Christ, not a problem to be solved. So, when we grasp that the Resurrection on Easter Morning is one event with the Ascension and Pentecost as well, then we can see that this 'moment' expands through time. It carries the power of the ever expanding salvific love of God in Christ, continuously given in the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit – the love which urges us on – reaching every generation and every moment in history. In this sense, the Resurrection is a dynamic, immanent future which impels us to our final consummation and fulfilment. In the Resurrection of His Son, God reveals the whole reason for creation and our gift of life.

The Gospel accounts give testimony to the fact there is a distinct change in the affective experience of those who knew Jesus when they encounter his risen self: from grief, sorrow, fear and hopelessness at His death, to hope, life, joy and energy to go out and tell others after His resurrection. The risen Christ is active and present in the reality of life and the world, despite it seeming to be impossible – this is as true today as it was then, we just need to be willing to let the Spirit work in and through us.

So often, the Resurrection can be presented as a stumbling block to reason, which can only be surmounted by some blind leap of faith. However, the contrary is the case. The Resurrection does not require our faith to abandon reason; it is reason's healing and restoration. It means that we can see and know clearly now not only that God Himself is our reason, the end to which all things move and in whom they find their meaning, but that this reason is Love in person that comes in search of us. In the new light of Easter we see God's reason: that we might not be lost, it is willing to suffer the contradiction of the Cross and enter into final oblivion of all reason in death. The future that abides with us in the Resurrection is the presence of the Risen Lord. It is a future which, in some sense, we already live now by the gift of grace. We not only witness to Christ but we live in Him – a reality which is with us every day in the celebration of the sacraments. This immanent future is the moment from which all the moments of our life take their orientation: 'I am with you always...' So, the Resurrection permeates the whole of existence, and orders it towards its goal and fulfilment. It means, too, that all those whom we love and have lived with in this Resurrection faith are not part of our past only but part of our future too.

It is tempting to linger over these features, to interrogate them and wonder how they could come about, as if they were some sort of divine special effects. There is no category into which they will neatly fit, they are their own category. They stand always within the power of God who, in raising Him from the dead, witnesses that Jesus is truly Son, whose sacrificial self-gift has been accepted. The Resurrection is the Father's testimony that in Christ we are saved. Indeed, the features become an obstacle if they absorb us so much that we miss the presence of the Risen One who stands among us. The person of Christ is the event of the Resurrection. We can't avoid Him, ignore Him, go round Him, climb over Him or lock Him out of the room. He's no longer subject to our conditions; that is why His Resurrection is at once so liberating and so frightening. The risen Christ comes into the mess and complexity of real life, and our encounters with the risen Christ will be typified by experiences of hope, joy and life even amidst struggles and the darkest times because Christ is able to walk with us and ease our fear, rekindling lost hope or faith, to bring trust and joy, and enabling us to attain a lived response of continued discipleship.

So, however we try to comprehend the accounts of the appearances, we should remember that they represent attempts to understand and to express the mystery of the finite transposed in the glory of God's life: it is a vision of life not only beyond death but beyond life.



Readings for Reflection
from the Gospels

Luke 24: 13-35. The Road to Emmaus
John 20: 24-29. Jesus and Thomas



The Supper at Emmaus. (Caravaggio. 1601)
National Gallery, London.

They walked and talked but did not see.
They welcomed the stranger in sorrow and doubt.
They felt the Scriptures burn into their hearts
but only when they sat down to eat –
did they see Jesus bless bread and man.



The Incredulity of St. Thomas.
(Caravaggio. 1601-02.)
Sanssouci, Potsdam, Germany.

Loving Lord who shatters tombs,
shatter any doubts in me.
You have risen from the dead
and blessed the world with hope and truth.
Your grace is all I need.



Rejoice, heavenly powers,
Rejoice, O Earth in shining splendour,
Rejoice, O Mother Church!
Exult in glory! The Risen Saviour shines upon you.

What good would life have been to us,
Had Christ not come as our redeemer?
Father; how wonderful your care for us!
How boundless your merciful love!
To ransom a slave, you handed over your only Son.
(The Exultet)

Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

Psalm 117