

If there is a day in the Christian calendar on which it is especially appropriate to speak about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, then Easter Day is *not* that day. For the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a *part* of the Christian faith, something, which from year to year, we remember like a birthday. The resurrection lies at the very centre of faith itself.

Leaving preaching on the resurrection especially to this day only gives the impression that it is just one of the many things which Christians have to believe – like an item on a religious list. Yet our church year almost forces this problem upon us, and we could also say the same about the other major Christian festivals. Talking about the incarnation at Christmas time, talking about the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, or talking about the Trinity on Trinity Sunday – such special focuses on those special days gives the impression that the Trinity is one thing we believe, and the giving of the Holy Spirit another thing, and the coming of God in Jesus at Christmas another.

In fact *each* Sunday is a coming together to celebrate Easter, Pentecost, the Trinity and Christmas.

*Each* Sunday's gathering of the Christian church is made possible by the Trinitarian God, once incarnate in the Son Jesus of Nazareth, this risen Jesus being now present in his Spirit.

But if this *is* the case, then it's well worth asking what might seem like rather a silly question – why *do* we celebrate these things at a specific time each year? It's a worthwhile question because the answer can help us understand what we're doing, and where we might lose the way. Yearly celebrations have something to do with the way we mark time, and that has something to do *not* with the special events themselves, but with the natural seasons. For thousands of years the patterns of the seasons have been noted, the cycles of the moon, and so forth. We've celebrated the coming each year of the spring sunshine and rains, the ripening of fruit and vegetable in summer, and then prepared ourselves for the winter again, before celebrating again the coming of another spring.

Within that cycle of seasons and moons we've also learned to place other special events. We remember that a certain number of days or moon cycles after the longest or shortest day of the year someone, say, was born, or died, or some other special event happened. And we count the same number of days in the next cycle to

remember it. We learn to associate the natural cycle of the seasons with happy times, or sad times. We talk of a "winter of discontent", or "summer love". When it comes to the church's festivals, the fact that we count 365 days from Christmas to Christmas has nothing to do with *Christmas* and what it means, but everything to do with the fact that that's just how long it takes for the earth to get back to the same hot spot (or cold spot, in the North!) each year. Easter, of course, jumps around a bit each year, but the principle is pretty much the same – counting cycles which have nothing to do with the meaning of Good Friday or Easter themselves.

Perhaps that's all very obvious! But the basic point is this: when we mark time by cycles like those of the seasons, we tie the present very firmly to the past. when *each year* we remember something which happened in the same part of the year before, or many years before, we are always looking *backwards*. Birthdays, for example, are such a looking backwards. "Remember" – we tell ourselves each year – remember what time it was when the contractions started, and then how dad took a wrong turn on the way to the hospital, and then how you made your mother suffer! The annual celebration of a birth looks backwards, and not towards the future.

Treating Easter and the other Christian festivals as a "remembering" suffers from just the same thing – all that seems to matter here is what happened "long ago". It is scarcely ever *said* that way, but we *sense* it. We indicate that this is what we really believe when, at Easter, when we find ourselves asking, "*Did* Jesus really rise?" "*Were* the disciples really not mistaken or deluded?" When we find that we can really only use the past tense for God's actions, we've thrown God and the reasons for believing in God into a distant past – a strange place, another country where they do things differently. Easter (and the other festivals) then becomes a mere *commemoration*. We *remember* the birth of Jesus, or remember the death and resurrection of Christ, or remember the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. And then, a day or so later, we get on the real business of living. How long does a birthday last? How long does Christmas last, before we're back into the normalities of living? These great moments all fall from our consciousness so quickly because we're really just *remembering*, and life is too busy to spend back there in the past. Yearly celebrations of Easter and the other Christian festivals have ended up like all our other celebrations – memorials.

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But when the church speaks about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, we speak not merely about something which happened a long time ago, and which we desperately want somehow to drag into the present. As I've said on other occasions, the church's faith is not in some *event* many years ago, but *in the presence of the risen Lord*. The church doesn't believe in "the resurrection", but in the risen presence of the crucified Jesus. The resurrection, the event which confused and astounded and amazed the men and women who knew Jesus, as a *past event*, is not something we can drag forward into our time now by way of *remembering*. The best we could do is to do as much historical work as we can, and make a couple of educated guesses as to what actually happened. But that isn't going to help because, of course, when that sort of work is done, everyone comes up with different conclusions! There isn't enough evidence in the New Testament to *make* us believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And even if there were, that would still leave Jesus' resurrection in the dead past.

More important for understanding Easter than the story of the empty tomb are the words of the risen Jesus, which we heard at the end of our reading this morning – "And remember, I am with you always". Belief in the resurrection is not a matter saying, "Yes, we think it happened", but "Yes, the risen Jesus is present to us now". There is still a remembering here, but now it is a remembering which is pointed towards our *future*. Not the thing in itself, an event *many years ago*, but the crucified Jesus himself, present *now* as the Christ – this is what the church means when it confesses faith in the resurrection.

Now that might seem like a subtle difference, but it's a very important one for the life – and the future – of the church. One of the other things Jesus says in the last couple of verses of Matthew's gospel is what is known as the "Great Commission" – Go and preach and teach and make disciples. That's something which many of us feel quite uncomfortable about – unless we can somehow in a faceless way do it behind the cover of "the church" – and even then we might hesitate. I suspect that the main reason for the embarrassment is not that we don't think that others should hear the good news, but that we've forgotten or not really yet experienced the truth behind the words which follow the Commission: Remember, I am with you *always*.

It's only when we begin to grasp this that the embarrassment the church often feels about things like the dead rising to life, virgins having

babies and people touched by tongues of fire and speaking in foreign languages will begin to fade. That Jesus rose from the grave 2000 or so years ago is not particularly good news in itself. The "2000 years" gets in the way, and all we really hear is that we missed out on the action, and now have to convince ourselves that these unlikely things really did happen.

BUT, that the crucified Jesus might be present to me *now* as Lord, in the power of the *same* Spirit which fell on the believers then, that *is* good news because these stories of what has happened are no longer about the past but become stories about our *future* – and that is what really interests us: where we are going. "I am with you always" is the risen, crucified one pointing not to what has happened, but to a context for what will yet happen – *whatever happens, Jesus is with us*. Time is marked by the sign of an empty tomb, and a promise: "tell my brothers to go to go on ahead ; there they will see me". Easter is not about remembering our Christian past but remembering our Christian future: the Christ we know from the past is the one who will journey with us into the future – who will himself, and all he has, *be* our future.

Of course our past stays with us. We remain those who betrayed Jesus, or denied him, or called for his crucifixion; we remain those who have been unfaithful or abusive or despairing. But we are also those who are forgiven, because in Jesus God has walked a path like we all walk. In Jesus God has experienced what we are capable of doing to each other. And in Jesus God offers us a new humanity, a future in which our very failures can become the possibility of unexpected life. We don't gather merely to remember what is hard to believe; we gather to hear again that the one who promised that he would always be with his disciples is *still* with them, in the reading of scripture, the preaching of the word, the celebration of the sacraments, the fellowship of the church, and also in the world we are called to serve.

*Christ is risen – he is risen indeed! – this is the what the church is, the reason we gather, and the source of the confidence we have to move forward without fear into whatever the world might serve up to us.*

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.