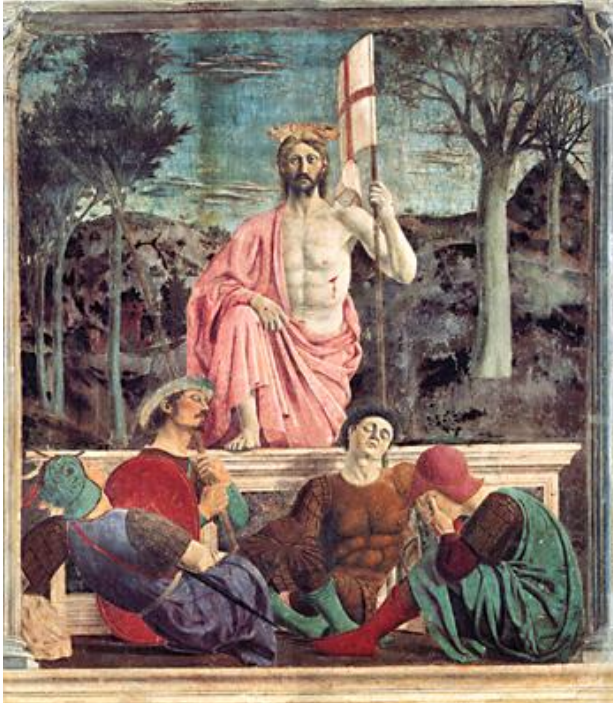


Trinity 4

Sunday 5th July 2020

Five Events that Shaped Christianity – Week 4

Event 3. Easter – The Manhunt



The Resurrection, Piero della Francesca

Readings:

1 Corinthians 15:12-22

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.

Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

Reflection

What happened?

The Resurrection is the touchstone of our Christian faith. As Paul says at the beginning of this reading from Corinthians, if there is no resurrection, there is no Christianity.

It was and remains a unique event. Though there are accounts of people being raised from death, they still died at the end of their “allotted span.” Jesus was raised for all time. So, the evangelists who have previously referenced the Old Testament in their Gospels, giving context to the Jesus story, are now in uncharted territory and uncertain how to react to this cosmic event. Their accounts vary in detail and can be confusing, but if we wish to go on this “manhunt,” to find the risen Christ, there are some key pieces of evidence which give us clues.

First there is the empty tomb itself, and all the Gospels are unanimous about that. There is no dead body; there are no bones to put into a shrine and venerate! And all the accounts ring true; they have an urgency and breathlessness. They record that the first witnesses were women, who were then less likely to be regarded as reliable sources than men, so that shows us that the writers were more interested in truth-telling than conforming to social norms.

Then came the resurrection appearances of Jesus and this was more uncharted territory. Various theories have been put forward to explain them away; perhaps collective memory or mass hallucination. And certainly, they are mysterious and raise several questions. Why was Jesus not immediately recognizable? Was his resurrection body physical or spiritual? The Gospel accounts suggest it must have been both! Yes – yet another paradox; but this was the first experience of the new world order, a time for wonders.

We see more evidence in the transformation of the disciples. The two from Emmaus, after their dejected walk home, are transformed into men who run ecstatically back to Jerusalem with their news. Classic before and after. All the disciples knew of the hope of resurrection but had not really believed it – till now. Something huge had happened to these men and women to change their lives - and that something was the resurrection.

And the continuing existence of the church is further evidence. Our own experience of declining church attendance in UK should not blind us to the vitality of growing churches abroad. The Church is still alive and growing and something happened to cause and sustain that growth; that something is the continuing life of the risen Christ in his Church. The disciples had shared the day to day existence of Jesus as a man for 3 years but now had to recalibrate their understanding of him, giving him new titles and acknowledging his victory over death. And we too can share their experience at the successful outcome of our own personal manhunt as we find him and recognize the presence of the risen Christ in our lives.

What does it mean?

Logically, the resurrection could not have happened – and yet it did - and changed everything thereafter. A manhunt followed the resurrection. But there was also a hunt for meaning – so what **does** the resurrection mean?

First that the cross is indeed victory and not defeat. Michael Ramsey said: “The crucifixion is not a defeat needing the resurrection to reverse it, but a victory which the resurrection quickly follows and seals.” In particular it is victory over death. The cross sounds like the ultimate victory of death but with the resurrection we see that the reverse is true. Death is still the enemy but a defeated enemy. Resurrection vindicates Jesus as our Messiah. There were then – and now – false Messiahs. But this event removed all doubt about Jesus’ identity; and that galvanized his followers into action.

It also gave us a glimpse of our own journey’s end. The resurrection brought God’s plans forward showing that the new creation has already begun, and Jesus has put it – and us - beyond the reach of death. He **is** alive, in the Spirit, and therefore, he can be experienced in our life today. We can know him in many guises, as friend, as the fascinating figure at the centre of our faith, and as contemplative vision; but always as risen Saviour.

What does it mean for us now?

Inevitably, the resurrection has implications for us – demanding, but all good.

As I began by saying, Easter is our touchstone. Resurrection is a game-changer; “a joy ... poignant as grief.” (Tolkien) Because of the resurrection, we are at the beginning of life – and life in abundance (John 10;10) And that is what matters to God; “not whether we are religious or not ... but whether we are alive or not.” (John V Taylor) And alive to him.

It gives us new personal priorities; we can’t go on living as we did before. We are not “conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds.” (Romans 12:2)

The resurrection gives us an agenda for change. As Christians we belong to the present - but also to the future as Jesus envisioned it. He announced a new social order which we call the kingdom of God. Sometimes it may make us sound unduly optimistic, amid the world’s woes, but we must continue to work for the transformation of **everything**.

And we have the wonderful assurance that we can approach death confidently. One of the most significant tests of resurrection life is how we deal with death - our own and that of others. As Paul tells us, our resurrection is inevitably linked with that of Christ. Resurrection teaches us not only how to live now but how to live again. As the church we need to take on the characteristics of the risen Christ - be a risen Church which promotes the qualities that he lived and taught. The Church is **the Kingdom in draft form** which gives us a great responsibility to show what that kingdom is/will be like. As the body of Christ, risen from the dead, we too bear his wounds, but, rather than the scars of death, they are a sign of hope for our bewildered world as it grapples with the many perils that face it. Amen

Prayers

Today’s Collect

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal;
grant this, heavenly Father,
for our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

A Prayer for our families

Today is Ellis' birthday so my mind is focussed even more than usual on my children.

Lord,

During this time of lockdown, so many families have been separated,

Unable to talk together, to kiss or hug.

We miss our children and grandchildren and long to be with them again.

Keep them, and us, safe,

And when this crisis is over, bring us together again

That we may share once more the joys of family life

And the comfort of each other's company.

Amen

Prayers for the NHS

Ellis shares his birthday with the NHS which is 72 today!

God of healing and compassion,

we thank you for the establishment of the National Health Service,

and for the dedication of all who work in it:

give skill, sympathy and resilience

to all who care for the sick,

and your wisdom to those engaged in medical research.

Strengthen all in their vocation through your Spirit,

that through their work many will be restored to health and strength;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Everlasting God,

at this time we lift to you

those from all nations and backgrounds

who work on the front line in healthcare.

Give them skill and wisdom in their work.

Be their strength and their shield

as they give of themselves in the care of others.

Amen

Blessing

You believe Jesus has been raised from the dead in glory.

You believe you have been raised with Christ.

May your hearts and minds be set on things above,

where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

And the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always.

Amen