

## Easter Day 2021

Some words from an American preacher, James Allan Francis, preached almost one hundred years ago:

*'He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then, for three years, he was an itinerant preacher.*

*He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn't go to college. He never lived in a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.*

*He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his garments, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend.*

*Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race. I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned--put together--have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.'*

James Allen Francis. There's a man who knew how to preach.

It's an interesting question, though, to ask whether he's actually correct. *All the armies that have ever marched all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned--put together--have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.* What a claim that is. And never mind kings and parliaments: Think of Muhammad, of Buddha, of Marx. Or of Fleming or Pasteur or Newton – what a claim it is to say that Jesus surpasses them all. That he, and he alone, is *the central figure of the human race.*

Could that claim be made if Easter wasn't true? If Jesus just *died*? Well, maybe it could. Arguably, Jesus, regardless of whether the claims made for him are actually true, is the single most important individual there has ever been. After all, whether he rose or not, whether he was God or not, people *thought* he did, and *thought* he was, and so his impact on the world has been almost incomparably huge. The story of the last two thousand years without 'the Christian bit', and so without Jesus, is almost unimaginable. Whether it's true or not.

But what if it's true? What then?

Well, then we are talking, quite simply, about a wholly new level of importance. We are no longer haggling about whether Muhammad or Marx might have had more impact on history than Jesus, or about how many followers each can sign up. We are talking about something much, much more fundamental, about the very depths of human experience, about the meaning and the purpose and the destiny of everything. If Easter is true, then there has never, ever, been anything more important. Anything more glorious. Anything more joyful.

Let us leave for now the reasons for thinking that it *is* true. Those reasons are there: not *proofs*, of course, but reasons. Good ones. You don't have to turn off your brain to believe this Gospel, it does stand up to questions and doubts. But that's for another time. For the moment, just hear again why it matters. Why, if Easter is true, everything is changed, and everything sings Hallelujah.

Easter matters, because we human beings know all about Good Friday. We know, some of us, what it is to be broken by pain. We know, some of us, what it is to be betrayed – and indeed, to betray. All of us, if we're remotely awake to what's going around us and in us, know what it is to be overwhelmed by sadness and shame and despair. Perhaps, if we're robust, we keep it at arm's length most of the time – but we all know it's there, a great sea of misery, immense, glowering, ready to flood in and drown. The sadness of other people's suffering, of our own failure, of the horror we sometimes glimpse.

On the Cross, Jesus Christ drinks all of it in. Do you remember, he talks about his cup of suffering, the cup he has to drink? It's a cup not just of physical suffering, terrible though that is: it is instead filled to the brim with sadness. With that bitter flood of shame, despair and guilt: of everything that belongs to the world gone wrong. And Jesus drinks it in. Bears it, in a way we could not even begin to, in a way that would break and end any other man.

And He does this because he is *not* any other man. He is *God* incarnate – which means He is bigger, deeper, more awesomely and gently *bearing* than we can possibly imagine. That sea of misery which would drown us in a moment, in Him is .... stilled. It rushes in and He bears it. He bears it.

And then – and this is where Good Friday turns to Easter – He does more than bear it. He begins to heal it. He begins to take all of that pain, all of that misery, and nurses it. Loves it. Says to it: *peace*. You can be right again. You can be free. And He does more than say it, He begins to make it happen.

This might all sound abstract. So make it more concrete. Think of the most wretched, broken, lost human being you can. Make it worse, make it someone *deservedly* lost. The person who has committed the worst crimes they could; the person who has died unmourned and unloved, still snorting with arrogance and hatred and pride, the one who you cannot imagine healed. The truly and justly damned.

Well, Easter says, even for them, it is not over. Easter says, even for them, there is yet hope. Even for that person, in the very depths of Hell, Jesus happens – and where there is Jesus, there is hope. We cannot say that they *must* be saved: that would presume too much. But we *can* say, we can *know*, that even for them, there is hope. The sea of misery does not get to keep its victims, because on Friday Jesus Christ has dived to its darkest depth. And on Easter Day he comes back up again, and He brings the drowned with Him.

*All the armies that have ever marched all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned--put together--have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.* That one solitary life: that death, that glorious Easter morning. They define everything. They change everything. From that day on, we know that misery does not win. It does not win *even* when it has done its worst. The most ruined, the most broken, the most ashamed – all of us, through one solitary life, death, and resurrection – *all of us*, are turned around and destined for glory. The world will not end in defeat. We will not end in defeat. We will be what we were made for: beauty, and joy, and glory. As yet, we barely know what that means, we see – as St Paul said – but in a glass, dimly. But one day, we will know: we'll know the whole sea of misery, turned around and set on fire with joy. Thanks to one solitary life, death, and resurrection, to which our only response can be Amen, Hallelujah.

Brothers and Sisters, Hallelujah, the Lord is Risen!

He is risen indeed, Hallelujah!