

Pentecost Sunday 2019

I'm going to start talking about Pentecost, by first speaking about Easter.

What do you think it means to believe in the Resurrection?

At one level, of course, it means believing that something happened to Jesus of Nazareth on the third day after his crucifixion. We can wonder – we really can wonder – what exactly that something was, whether for example it necessarily involved an empty tomb, and what exactly the risen body of Christ might look like or even what those words mean. But whatever we make of that, believing in resurrection certainly involves believing that in some sense Jesus lives, that death has tried to swallow him up and failed. That is the first crucial moment in Resurrection faith.

But it is only the first. And the second comes today on Pentecost Sunday, and it's the recognition that Resurrection is also, just as much, something which happens to us. And by that I do not mean just something which *will* happen to us, after our death and at the end of time – though indeed, our hope does reach that far. I mean rather something which happens now, something which is the ordinary business of being a Christian.

'I will ask the Father, says Jesus, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you, forever'. It is a mysterious promise, much debated by scholars. The word 'advocate' means one who speaks on another's behalf like a lawyer, but the Greek also has the sense of one who comforts and strengthens, who enables people to be fully themselves.

It is as if John and Jesus sense that left to themselves, human beings will struggle.

We are broken and tired and small.

Not horrible, not evil – we are made in the image of God, made with the capacity for love and joy and beauty.

Not evil, but somehow choked, too weak and confused to be what we were made for. What we were made for, we can see in the person of Jesus: the way, the truth, and the life. There is what being really human, really in the image of God means: a life which simply shines with goodness and joy, in which there is love and nothing else.

That is not a bad stab at what that mysterious line in the Creed means – that the Son is ‘of one substance with the Father’. Jesus Christ is simply what divinity looks like when it becomes human – pure, joyous, life-giving love, and nothing else. He is truly human, and truly divine.

And because Jesus is God – simply the most real reality of all, the very source of all existence, the power which allows all else to be – death has no dominion over Him. Death can no more stop this eternal joy than a pebble can stop a river. It thunders on in utter disregard for the puny-ness of death, the puny-ness of sin. The realities of failure and sorrow, which seem so real, so crushing to us, are simply burned up in Him. As St. Paul puts it, ‘where o death is your sting? where is your victory? Death has been swallowed up in victory’. The river thunders on.

And it thunders on, promises Jesus, into us. ‘Because I live, you will live’. Death and failure and sin are not just big abstract nouns, they are realities which we know inside ourselves.

They are our small-mindedness, our lack of ambition, the way in which our longing for goodness and grace and beauty get distracted and suppressed and distorted – all the ways in which we are battered by life and settle for being less than we were called to be.

They are all the ways in which the image of God within us is choked and disfigured, by ourselves and others, all the ways in which we fall short of being really ourselves, really like Jesus. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, comes to put them right, to restore our wounded nature, to make us – like Jesus – shine as the glory of God.

So the resurrection does not just happen to Jesus, it happens to the ruins of our human nature, raising it up to become what John describes just a few verses after our Gospel ends as God’s home. God’s Home: look at your battered lives and think that that is what they will become. That is what they are becoming, as you welcome him into you with the bread and wine.

And that is what Resurrection, and Pentecost, means.