

Trinity VI, 19 July 2020

Rom 8:12-25 (MP: Is.62:1-7; HC: Matthew 27:45-54)

The whole creation waits, with eager longing....

That has to have a good claim to being one of the most unbelievable verses in the Bible, doesn't it?

At the moment Jesus died, Matthew's Gospel says, 'the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.'

This, to put it mildly, is remarkable. Astounding, even. *Many* of the dead walking around, and appearing to many? Odder still, there is no other record of this event at all, anywhere. No worried report from a Temple priest or the Roman governor; not even a mention in the other three Gospels. Just one verse in Matthew: that is the sole piece of evidence for this most astonishing fact. It seems odd, doesn't it, that nobody else remembered what must have been those amazing encounters?

What to make of it? Well, we all have different degrees of tolerance for the amazing and miraculous when we read the Gospels. Some people think it's all, or mostly, symbolic. *Of course*, He didn't really walk on the water; he didn't really magic up food for thousands out of a few loaves and fishes ... it's all picture language for bigger, spiritual truths. Others, myself included, think no: most of that stuff really happened, and really was miraculous. But nearly all of us, I reckon, would pause long and hard before saying, yes, I believe resurrection morning in Jerusalem happened just the way Matthew said; that there were lots of dead people walking round the streets. Whatever that is, I think most of us would say, it's not history. Which raises of course the interesting question, what is it?

Back to that in a moment. First, back once again to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, and the great Chapter Eight. I promise you that this and Matthew tie together, but it takes a little while to get there.

Our reading from Romans this morning starts in an apparently unrelated place. Paul is talking about the fact that we are children of God, and that what the Spirit of God enables us to do is to call God 'Father'. Now, we are so used to this idea that it has lost all sense of surprise or astonishment for us: we just think it's *obvious* that all human beings are God's children. And in a sense of course that's true. Paul knew that too. But here he's talking about the sense that isn't obvious, about taking the idea just a little further. If we're children of God, he says, then we're heirs. Heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.

Joint heirs with Christ. That's the key thing. You've heard me say repeatedly over the last few weeks that for Paul, when you are baptised, the most important thing about you is *no longer you*. You have been changed, at the very roots of your being, the very heart of your identity. In baptism, Jesus becomes one with you. He is not just a great teacher outside of you, a good example, a moral hero: he's *you*. His identity is big enough, open enough, to welcome you inside him, to make you part of Him. It's no longer just me, but Christ who lives in me, exclaims Paul at one point. It's what we mean when we call the Church the Body of Christ.

Well, if this is so, then what's happened is that through baptism, we are placed inside Jesus' relationship to God. Inside the Son's relationship to the Father. And that means, says Paul, we're *heirs*. Everything that Jesus receives from his Father, everything the Father has stored up for his beloved Son, *everything* will be ours, because we are in Him. When he took our place on the Cross, we took his in the Father's heart. All of heaven is now ours, by right.

And when I say heaven, I don't just mean a place where you go when you die. I mean things we can barely begin to articulate. I mean wonder and beauty and brilliance and joy and life and all these things to a degree and intensity we cannot conceive of. Do you remember when Paul first met the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road? What did he see? A blinding flash of light, and that is wonderful, because what it says is that Paul's senses and mind were simply overwhelmed. He was dealing with something too big, too glorious, to describe or conceptualise.

And that, Paul teaches, is what we're heading into. We are *heirs*. Everything the Father has, everything He has given to Jesus, everything is coming our way. We do not have the language, the ideas, the vision, to cope with our destiny. As Paul puts to the Corinthians, 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.' We make awful, twee pictures of sitting on clouds playing harps, or sitting in a church service which goes on forever – forget them. Your mind is made for *this* world; it cannot conceive, it cannot cope with glory. We do not know what it means; we simply know that it shall be wonderful.

Heaven belongs to us by right, I said. And the danger of heaven language is that we assume it can't be talking about earth. Talking about heaven can't be talking about earth. Earth is the place where things don't work very well. Where they wind down and die. As Paul puts in Romans 8, where things are in bondage to decay. Things fall apart: morally, physically, mentally – in every way this world is in decline. Even the youngest and most brilliant amongst us are on a timer. We're going to wear out. The whole thing is going to wear out: the great globe itself and all which it inherit, dissolve and like an insubstantial pageant leave not a rack behind. Our bodies will wind down and die; the universe will slowly collapse into exhaustion. Salvation means escaping out of this tired old place into heaven.

That sounds quite plausible. And yet ... **it is absolutely not what St. Paul is saying.** It is absolutely not what St. Paul is saying. When he imagines salvation, he is not thinking that our spirits or souls are going to fly off somewhere beyond all this, leaving the earth behind. No, listen to what he says. *'The whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.'* Waits with eager longing – why? Because when we come into our inheritance, when we are filled with the beauty and brilliance of Jesus, 'creation itself,' says Paul, 'will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.' Creation itself will be set free from the bondage of decay, and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words: The universe will not end in the great freeze, or the big smash. The earth itself will not sink down into futility. The animals, the birds, the fish, the trees None of them were made to end in defeat. None of them were destined for bondage to decay. Now, of course they do. Now they're trapped in futility. But they're waiting, waiting expectantly, waiting on tenterhooks. Waiting for *us*. They're waiting for us to be what God intended; and

when we are, they too will be free. They too will come into their glory. Death is not the end of them, any more than it is of us.

Now, can I tell you what that looks like? Can I tell you what it means for a tree to be swept up into glory? No, I can't. No more than I can tell you what your resurrection will look like. Describing the resurrection is like staring into the sun, or into the blinding light on the Damascus Road. Our current eyes, our current brains, cannot bear the glory. But that does not mean it is not real. And Paul says, it is where we're *all* going: you, me, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, all creation rescued and renewed by God.

And what Paul says in an argument, Matthew says in a picture. I don't know if the tombs around Jerusalem opened that morning, and the ancient dead got up and walked around. Actually, I don't think they did. That story didn't happen. That's not the same thing, though, as saying that it's not true. It is really *true*. Gloriously, wonderfully, and emphatically true, because it tells the truth. It tells the truth that because Jesus Christ died and lived, everyone will live even though they die. Everybody's story changes, because of his story. Everyone is given a new ending. As Paul put it, as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall *all* be made alive.

And it's quite right that Matthew's story is about *bodies* getting up and walking around. It's not about ghosts. Not about souls. It's about *flesh*. The rocks split, the tombs opened, and the bodies came out. Why? First, Paul would say because it is the *whole* us that is going into glory. Not just an invisible, spiritual bit. The real you is the physical you. God made all of you, and wants all of you. Second, because it's our bodies which make us most obviously part of this world – most obviously one with the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the great bundle of life. The resurrection of our bodies promises life for *all* bodies. God made it all, and he wants it all. And in Jesus Christ, he will have it.

This is the Gospel. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing else but the beginning of the rescue and the renewal of all things. The great turning around has begun, and freedom is on its way. We cannot say exactly what it will look like. We cannot say exactly how it will work. But we can say that the whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay. Starting with us, and in us, all things will come to know the glorious liberty of the children of God, and will forever sing glory to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hallelujah, and Amen.