

Easter Morning 2015

The Bishop of Chelmsford's Sermon

I thought – for a bit of a change - I might speak to you about the Christian faith this morning. I know you will not think this a very remarkable thing to do – after all isn't this what happens every Sunday? But – and without meaning to cast aspersions on the usual occupants of this pulpit – I am increasingly worried that Sunday by Sunday, and more importantly Easter by Easter, something *like* the Christian faith, or just some bits of the Christian faith, are preached from our pulpits, but the full blooded, biblical roller coaster is not. And without this foundation in place, is it any wonder that faith in Britain is seen as a private matter, more concerned with heaven than earth. As the politicians are telling us at the moment: please keep your beliefs in the box marked Sunday morning.

So let me try and put it as plainly as I can. And it is about the resurrection that we must speak. Because just as Jesus burst from the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, so the Christian faith, once we have got it straight, will burst out of Sunday into every other day of the week and into every aspect of life.

The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning and the centre of the Christian faith. It is not some difficult pill that we must swallow, whilst really – though we don't admit it in public – not believing it at all. After all, don't reasonable Christians think of the resurrection as a metaphor, not an event: Jesus the wise and godly teacher whose memory and influence live on in those who follow him. Paradoxically, for sane, rational people like us, Good Friday is so much easier. It is all about death, and that is something we know. Heroic suffering and valiant compassion is something we can all admire and learn from most of the time. But this isn't quite the Christian faith, well certainly not the whole story, for the resurrection of Jesus is not an absurd and inexplicable event within the otherwise sane and rational world that we know, but the dramatic starting point of a new world. What God does in raising Jesus from the dead is not to create a new religion or a new ethic or even for that matter a new way of salvation, if, that is, you continue to think that salvation means being saved from this life when you die (thus keeping faith itself in the private compartment), but a new beginning, or, as the Bible puts it, a new creation. The message of Easter is not that once upon a time God did something completely extraordinary and you've just got to believe it (or pretend to believe it when you're in church); nor that because Jesus was raised from death we too can look forward to some sort of blissful, heavenly life after death, our soul sort of floating out of our body and up to heaven. The message of Easter is this: God's new creation, God's new order for heaven and earth, has been unveiled in Jesus Christ and now you are invited to be part of it. In the resurrection of Jesus God's future promise of new creation comes rushing into our present. And it is because the resurrection is physical - an empty tomb and a bodily resurrection – the power of Easter is actually about the power to transform the world, and the Christian life is not simply about trying to be good so that when we die we will have run up a healthy credit balance with God and we will be resurrected too, but of learning to live in the new world now, to live tomorrow's life today, to live in this life as if God's reign of justice, love and peace had already begun, which in Jesus it has; and it is through our baptism that we die and rise

with him into this new dispensation. Salvation, then, is not simply 'going to heaven' but 'being raised to life in God's new heaven and new earth', the new creation of which the resurrection of Jesus is the first part; not something impossibly strange that can never fit into the jigsaw of this world no matter how hard we try, but the first piece of a new picture in which all the pieces of our lives will eventually be gathered, transformed and put together. And because this new world begins with the resurrection of Jesus and is made present to us through baptism, we don't need to wait till we die to be part of it. In every day and in every way, Monday to Friday, Sunday by Sunday, in our homes, our places of work, with our families and with our colleagues and with our neighbours, we can be contributing to this new order by living lives of service and by offering the world a vision of justice and peace.

It seems more relevant than ever to be declaring this Easter faith this year with an election campaign gathering pace but not necessarily winning many hearts. Our world cries out for vision: a set of values and a direction that will lead us away from the siloes and hatreds that continue to mire the world, and our communities, in conflict and dis-ease. We see this in Jesus, risen from the dead. It is what Mary Magdalene saw on the first Easter morning. It is what we are celebrating today. A new communion and a new creation that we are part of. Without the resurrection the Christian faith is a philosophy. With it, Jesus is Lord – and everything else is commentary.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy Catholic Church;
The communion of Saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.

+Stephen Chelmsford

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