

There is but one story - ...

... One Jesus.

A sermon given on the on the Third Sunday of Easter, 18th April 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Luke 24.36b-48

Funerals can be challenging occasions: not just because they can be times of immense grief and sorrow; not just because they can often expose family relationships and memories, the bad as well as the good; but I would say principally they can be challenging because they force you to confront what you really believe.

The Church of England funeral service would often start with these words from John Chapter 11 - "I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." If heard, received and truly believed, these words capture in just two sentences the hope we have in our Christian faith: death is not God's plan; we were not born to die, but born to live; and through Jesus's death and resurrection, death has been defeated.

I wonder if you watched or listened to the funeral of His Royal Highness Prince Philip yesterday. If you did, you'll know that these words as part of the larger bible reading on the death and resurrection of Jesus's friend Lazarus, were read by Archbishop Justin Welby. These words were and are, I'm sure, of great comfort to Her Majesty the Queen. For when Jesus spoke these words, he wasn't saying to Martha and Mary that Lazarus would merely live by living on somehow in their hearts; he similarly was saying when he spoke to Jairus about his daughter who had already been pronounced dead, that she would be saved. He wasn't talking in abstract or conceptual terms. He bodily raised her from the dead. And so it is with today's gospel reading, with Jesus appearing to the disciples in the locked room. When compared with John's account of the same event, the Gospel of Luke particularly captures and confronts us with the living bodily reality of Jesus's resurrection. Do we come here this morning to expect to encounter the living or the dead; a memorial; an echo of a past relationship; a past face; **OR**, an encounter with the one who was and is and is to come?

Despite having received the first two reports of Jesus' resurrection from Mary and the two disciples experience on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus appears in their midst, they are

convinced he's a ghost; that echo; that ethereal memory or shadow of someone perhaps even recognised as somebody they once knew.

But now we are left in no doubt by the gospel account. Jesus helps them in their disbelief by asking for and eating some fish in front of them. It is Jesus, alive with real flesh and bones. But more than this, this wasn't somehow a 'MK II Jesus', a 'Jesus 2.0'. This was the very same Jesus that they knew and loved. He bore the scars and he let them touch them. The scars were the physical signs that showed his friends that he was the same one who had journeyed with them all the way to the cross and then through the cross.

Now, this is key to our own understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. If the Jesus who died was historical, but the one who the disciples now follow is a different eternal Christ, then we simply bask in the spiritual afterglow of the cross, rather than being called to live the way of the cross, a life that cause us to risk ourselves as we engage with the world and the issues of the world. The Jesus they knew before the cross wasn't simply a memory: that very same person was standing in front of them.

Now memories can be malleable, whereas living people are not. I'm a big Beatles fan, and I was recently watching a clip of a documentary interview with George, Paul and Ringo, reminiscing about some of their earliest times together in Liverpool and Hamburg. It was lovely to see three old friends enjoying their collective memories, but it was also made even more interesting by seeing what one of them had forgotten and how the other may have misremembered or remembered differently: memories they had were confronted and unseated by the reality of sitting in front of old friends right there.

So it is for us today. If we merely remember Jesus, we can remember the bits that suit us, our favourite bits, and quietly drop the bits that we don't care to recall. But if we continually seek to encounter the living Jesus, we must be prepared to be unsettled, encouraged, commissioned and possibly even corrected. It's worth considering for a moment whether the merely remembered Jesus or the collectively imagined Jesus or even the ghost of Jesus would have been capable of giving the disciples a commission to tell all nations; would the memory of Jesus have been enough to cause the disciples to risk the rest of their lives.

Finally, let me ask you, did you come here today expecting something old or something new? (Don't answer. It's a trick question.) When we hear Jesus speak to the disciples, we hear that there is no such thing as old and new. Jesus tells us that they are one and the

same. He is both the old and the new. Just as he did on the Emmaus road, he helps them to see that everything that has happened, everything that he has done, has been in accordance with the scriptures. He is the beginning and the end. He is the thread that connects the old story with the new story. But more than that, he then passes that thread onto the disciples and asks them to continue the story: "*You are witnesses; tell all the nations of what you know*" he says. So new pages continue to be written, first, quite literally, in recording the acts of the apostles and then the rest of the New Testament scriptures.

But the challenge continues with us today. The baton has been passed down through the ages and is now passed to us to be part of the continuing story of the mission of God. At Jesus's direction and following his lead, we've been told the story so far and we've been told the ending - the spoiler is that it turns out it will be all right in the end. And we are called to act out the story today to improvise the missing pages of the play. So there is no new and old, no contemporary and traditional. There is but one story, one Jesus.

So as we gather together this morning, just as disciples gathered in that same upper room, and join together in Holy Communion, let our prayer be that we may encounter afresh the risen Jesus and be ready to hear his direction and call on our lives and on the life of his church.

Reading Text

Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?' ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.