

Easter Day
20/4/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:33-43

Psalm 118

Colossians 3:1-4

John 20:1-18

Living in the Eighth Day

Our gospel reading began, “Early on the first day of the week...” – a seemingly harmless little detail and yet one which could be read to contain the whole significance of the Easter event. Mary, Peter or the other disciple are not in any position to see the importance of it, yet. For them, until the meaning of the empty tomb is made clear by their meeting the risen Lord: this “first day” of the week is simply the Sunday after the Saturday before. What is not yet clear to them is that *this* “first day of the week” is *not* simply the first day which follows the seventh day and will come around again in seven days time, and again in seven days time, and so on. The day on which Jesus is risen from the dead is no mere “first day of the week”, but might better be understood – as did much of the early church – as the *eighth* day of the week.¹

Of course, the pattern of first day, second day, third day and so on has continued ever since then - we don't recognise an “eighth day” in our week. Rather, the eighth day is the *first* day of the *new* creation, when *again* God says “Let there be light!” and the unending darkness of death is split open. *With the resurrection of Jesus the times change.* And not simply in that we count the time differently, marking our times as being before and after the time of Jesus with a BC or an AD. With the resurrection of Jesus the *nature* of the time in which we live changes, and not the amount of time we have or how we count it. This is the significance of Jesus' resurrection: we live – with Mary and Peter and all since – in the first day of God's new creation.

This is not an easy thing to get our heads around because, in an important sense, we are no longer in a position to understand what Jesus' resurrection meant, at least in the terms in which it was proclaimed to those who first heard of it. Our modern mindset – our way of thinking about the world – is not shaped by the apocalyptic thought of first century Palestine and the kinds of expectations that went with that.

When *we* hear of the resurrection of Jesus, our first questions are typically, “*how* could such thing happen?”, or “*did* it really happen? These questions are reasonable enough in themselves – and were probably also the questions of Jesus' disciples – but we don't really have any framework which would tell us what to do with a “yes” answer – “yes, it really has happened, *therefore*...” It would be quite conceivable, if after somebody had done all of the historical work that was necessary, and she had come to the conclusion that Jesus *was* raised the dead, that she simply said, “Good for him!”, and then moved on to the next curious thing.

Perhaps some of you saw the French mini-series *The Returned* over the last couple of months. Central to the plot of the story was the return to friends and family of a number of people who had died over the previous 30 years or so. Not surprisingly there are

¹ For further information on the place of the eighth day in Christian thinking, and the place of Sunday relative to the Jewish Sabbath, see Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann: “On the Origins of Worship on Sunday - The Mystery of the Eighth Day”, http://jbburnett.com/resources/schmemmann/schmemmann_intro-2-8th-day.pdf.

religious undertones and questions running through the story. But for our purposes this morning the interesting thing is the utter confusion which results from “the return”. While it is absolutely undeniable for those who meet their dead again that those dead are indeed now “alive” there is no meaning borne along with the experience. The resurrection or, perhaps, resuscitation is simply a sheer contradiction of the natural order which even the memory of Christian talk of resurrection can make no sense of. It might well be called a miracle, but it is meaningless.

That would not have been possible for somebody in Jesus’ time – not because they were more credulous than us but because, if Jesus were raised from the dead, the consequences would have been pretty obvious to those everyone who heard about it. In particular, if Jesus is risen from the dead, then the thought would have been: “the end of the world has begun.” That particular first day of the week, the day on which Jesus was raised, could no longer be understood as simply another Sunday, just like the one the week before and which would be followed by the same sort of Sunday a week later. If Jesus *is* risen from the dead, then something is now fundamentally different: the time of the new creation has begun.

That’s no longer obvious to us today, because our modern and secular ways of thinking have no real sense of the possibility of a different *quality* of time,² and certainly no sense that such a new quality of time would be connected with the resurrection of the dead. But the point of the gospels is that if Jesus *is* risen, then the world as we know it is passing away, and a new world is being installed in its place.

But even the church does not well understand this, for we celebrate Easter in such a way as to treat the crucifixion and the resurrection simply as things that happened in the past. Just as a birthday comes around and comes around and comes around every year, so *Easter* comes around and around and around every year (and the same sort of problem arises with Christmas).³

But *if* that first day of the week upon which Jesus was risen was in fact some kind of “eighth day” – the beginning of a new *quality* of time – then there is in fact no specifically *theological* reason for us to commemorate Easter or Christmas. We are so used to our annual pattern that it is difficult to think of being church without them. *And yet*, the changing of the times in the resurrection of Jesus gives us such permission, and we deny ourselves that freedom at the risk of losing the gospel.

This is part of the offensiveness of the resurrection of Jesus – even for those who confess it: *the world is now ordered differently*. When the dead no longer stay where we put them, everything is up for grabs.

² More to the point, time typically has for us only one quality – a strictly chronological one.

³ It is worth considering – to reinforce the point – whether the most significant thing the church could do in relation to the way Easter and Christmas are now understood in our society *and more often as not in the church*, would actually be to *cease* to celebrate them as “religious” festivals. Of course, that would be extraordinarily difficult because we are so closely attached to the practice of remembering in that way (and it usually takes guns and a goose-stepping police force to bring that kind of change about!) The strongest reason for the church retaining its celebration of Easter and Christmas at the traditional times is not that it likes doing it, or that it has always done it that way, but that to continue to be part of those celebrations in our secular society is a matter of mercy. For without the church being present to remind the world just what the holidays of Easter and Christmas are actually about, they would simply become occasions of heartless consumerism tinged with wishful thinking about what the world might have been like.

Now, I don't particularly want to argue for not having a Christmas service or an Easter service next year – it's not an issue worth dying for! The point is simply that our practices and our beliefs are often in contradiction with each other, in the most subtle and yet significant of ways. It's not a matter of being hypocritical, but rather one of not having been thoroughly converted. Even if we do continue to read the last few chapters of the Gospels at Easter and the first couple of chapters of the Gospels at Christmas, we needed to stop thinking about them as "Easter" and "Christmas" stories. If that's all they are, it makes them little more than stories about Captain Cook on Australia Day or war heroics on ANZAC day.

The difference between the day Jesus was risen being the *first* day of the week and it being the *eighth* day of the week is the difference between whether we read John 20 because it is Easter or whether *any* time we read John 20 it might *become* "Easter". And so also for our reading of *any* other New Testament text, written and to be understood to reflect what it means to live in a new time.

We *are* creatures of habit, and cycles and patterns and seasons are important to us. This may well be a fundamental feature of being human, but perhaps it isn't either. Perhaps the time will come when the meaning of the gospel in its marking of *all* time with the death and resurrection of Jesus will mean that we move away from ways of remembering which actually distract us from the significance of Easter for a good part of the other 362 days of the year. It is our usual practice to let the time tell us which texts we should read – Easter texts at Easter, Christmas texts at Christmas, and so on. But the logic of the resurrection faith works the other way around: the scriptures we read should tell us what time it is, what sort of time we are living in, whenever we happen to read them.

Easter *doesn't* present to us a problem about whether or not the dead can rise, but with a question: "What time is it?" Our answer to that question is always important. Our answer will determine whether or not we are living the lives for which we have been re-created.

Do we live lives in "normal" time, lives which are not much more than cycles in which day follows day and week follows week, month follows month, year follows year until someone else takes our place?

Or do we live lives which move not simply in the cycles of the calendar with its dates and festivals and ordinary times, but lives which are ever moving towards the light of a new day – the Lord's day, the day of the new life of the resurrection? Is the time we live captive to the possibilities of a *new* creation, a new ordering of human life and potential?

These are the types of questions to which the resurrection of Jesus gives rise: is anything truly new possible?

"It was the first day of the week..." – it is *today* the first day of the week not because it is Sunday, but because the eighth day has dawned – the day of the new creation. And so, in a sense, *every* day is that first day of the week because *all* days are now days on which we might hear that Christ is risen; all days are now days in which, if we would allow it, we too might be drawn into the light of the new creation; all days are now days in which hope may be spoken and rejoicing may be heard.

May God add to his blessings to us a renewed sense of the newness of the times in which we now live, and the joy which comes with that!
