

Easter Sermon, Luke 24:1-12
St Peter's Limpsfield, 21st April 2019

***Resurgam*: Resurrection once, and continuing**

The devastating fire at Notre Dame cathedral early this Holy Week has sparked stories and memories of major fires at two English cathedrals, after which they rose again more strongly.

When stone was laid for the centre of the new building, stones from the Old St. Paul's which had burned down in the Great Fire of London in 1666 were used. Christopher Wren noticed that one of the stones was marked with the Latin inscription "*resurgam*", meaning "I shall rise again". He had the word inscribed on the pediment of the south door, beneath a carved phoenix. You can still go and see it there. This is a powerful image both of the renewed cathedral and of our Christian hope and faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

In 1984, the roof of the south transept of York Minster was destroyed by fire, most likely caused by lightning. This came three days after the consecration of David Jenkins, Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds, as Bishop of Durham. Bishop Jenkins had said that the resurrection "was not just a conjuring trick with bones". His style and the way this was reported made him a controversial figure. Fear was expressed that the fire was a sign from God in response to Bishop Jenkins' consecration!

Actually the heart of Bishop Jenkins' mission was his demand that no one should believe in the kind of God who would care more about the opinions of academic theologians, or even bishops, than the suffering of people in Auschwitz. Why should lightning strike York Minster when God conspicuously failed to stop the Holocaust?

What sort of God is this then that we worship? What sort of God does the crucified and risen Jesus show us? One of the privileges of my job is to be with people in the midst of loss and grief. Sometimes I hear that an untimely death has broken any faith in God they had.

Perhaps the journey of Holy Week to Easter offers an opportunity to re-frame how we think about and experience God.

For the God we see in Jesus is not a God who dispenses arbitrary suffering or unfair loss, or who even makes sure that nothing bad happens to us if we try hard enough. Rather, today is the climax of Jesus' *Passion*, from the Latin word meaning suffering. And the God who Jesus shows us is a God of *com-passion*, offering the hope and trust in God who is with us in our suffering, whatever that might be. No cross, no resurrection. No Calvary, no Easter. They go together. As we recognise in our lives, where our love, our sorrow and our joy cannot be pulled apart from each other. We may be healed of some things and forgiven some things, but they are still part of us.

Resurrection, like baptism, is a once for all event. And, also like baptism, it's an event which keeps going, throughout our lives and beyond. Easter is now. And Easter is every time when, through the Calvaries of our lives, we experience the love and hope of Christ.

Bishop Jenkins also said that the resurrection was not only a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus's life, power, purpose and personality were actually continuing.

He was right about that, too. Some of those continuing stories are those we hear over the coming seven weeks of Eastertide. Some of those continuing stories are ours, when we experience, in ways that are often known only to those closest to us, or to no-one else at all, those Good Friday times of loss, loneliness, quiet griefs, sin, damage, despair. And our renewal by the grace of God, emerging from the ashes of our brokenness, knowing the joy of new life. How we find meaning in this once-for-all event is through repeated processes.

As for the resurrection, so too with our baptism. It is first an event and then a process, a lived experience of many generations of Christians. For our one-off baptism to bear fruit, we need to be doing those things that help it to grow. We'll renew our vows together in a minute. And if we are looking for evidence for the resurrection, perhaps the best place to start is to look around us here and now. At the power of our church building transformed by new glory. And our lives being blessed and transformed, often quietly, by renewed faith, and hope, and love.

One of the things Jenkins was trying to get across to a culture that basically regarded the Bible as a series of facts that no one today need care about because they are outmoded and untrue was this: that the Bible, if it is true, cannot just be a database of facts, like a historical event which could have been captured by a video camera, had one been handy at the time. It is full of a thousand years of very varied stories of God and God's people, climaxing with the stories of Jesus the Christ, and people responding to them.

In Luke's gospel which we have heard today, the women are the faithful witnesses and the first witnesses to the resurrection. The apostles didn't believe them. Their words 'seemed to them an idle tale.' They needed to experience it for themselves. And this took time, doubt, questions and a whole journey of faith. So it is for us.

Today is a most wonderful day for us as Christians; but it is just the summit of the mountain. What about the rest of the mountain, and the valley, where we explore, love serve, stumble, and enjoy God's gift again. Remember, each one of you brings your own gifts and makes a difference to this church serving our parish.

May these first Easter rumours of glory touch and bless and rise again in our lives today, and help us to bear fruit as God's people in the year to come. Amen.

James Percival,
Team Rector