

Easter II 2007 How does the Resurrection save us?

I can just about remember some of the classes back in theological college – the ones in *atonement* and *soteriology*. These were the ones where it was explained to us precisely how the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ saves us from sin, death and hell. I confess I didn't get much from these classes: they were more like accountancy than divinity. They came with diagrams, equations and jars and jars of jargon. But I'd like to have another go at this question today. How does Christ save us?

The most appealing and lovable part of the Christian faith is that at its centre is not a system or a set of propositions. At its centre is a person. When we read the gospels, we are put into contact with a person. And the most wonderful part of these Resurrection appearances we read in the Sundays after Easter is the real, distinctive and recognisable person of Jesus.

The disciples can hardly believe it. So what does he do? That most ordinary and human thing – he asks them for something to eat. Just forget the Cross and the Resurrection for a minute. Can you not see and feel the love of Christ as he turns his face to them and asks for something to eat. *See he says it is I, myself.*

Concentrate and think about it. You see his face. You look into the face of Christ. You can hear his voice. And then that perfumed garden scene when he says to her: *Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?* There is a silence and you're standing with her in that garden and he says the one word, *Mary*. The reality of Christ is overwhelming.

You should sit quietly in the April evening and read these stories at the end of St Luke's gospel and St John's. And then close your Bible and shut your eyes. Enter into each one of the stories in turn and you will feel the reality of Jesus. You will know that he is saving you. This is what love is. This is what prayer is. It is all in his reality, himself just given to you as a present. His face. His hands. *Behold, my hands.*

Speaking of the April evening, recall the story of the walk to Emmaus. There is something enchanting about the April evening – for it's the first month in the year when it stays light in the evenings. And there's a calm in that late evening light. A softness. As after a struggle. And he meets the couple on the country walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. In the last of the light, all in the April evening. Think of the Lamb of God. Think this story is what William Cowper was thinking about when he wrote *O for a closer walk with God*

And the couple don't recognise him but they ask him into their home. They are a married couple. And what they say has given rise to one of the best-loved hymns of all time: *Abide with us: for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.*

You can feel the quiet and peacefulness of their room where they take him and prepare some food. And St Luke's words: *And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread and blessed it and brake and gave to them. And their eyes were opened. And they knew him.*

Just that. Simple. Where had he done that before? We remember *In the same night that he was betrayed...and he took bread and blessed it and brake it*. And they knew him in the breaking of bread. What goes for that couple in the Emmaus house goes for you too. And Jesus is the bread which is broken for you. So you see, you can recognise him and you know he saves you. He saves you by his love. And his love is just as much in that small act of breaking bread as it was when his body was broken on the Cross. All you need to understand this is to draw close to him. All you need is to give the story your full attention, to enter into the story in your mind's eye, in your imagination. That is prayer. And prayer makes real what you allow your imagination to play on. The gospel stories are not past and gone. They are alive for you. And they invite you in. They invite you to enter them

You can take a single verse from these Resurrection stories and feel in it the whole reality of Christ's presence. Just think of: *And he led them out as far as to Bethany and he lifted up his hands and he blessed them*. What is that like? Well, Bethany is just two miles from Jerusalem. It's the same walk that he did many times in the days before Good Friday, to and from the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. You come down the steps from Temple Mount and cross the little brook called Kidron. And then you walk up the Mount of Olives and past the Garden of Gethsemane.

If you pause here and look back down over Jerusalem, you'll see it just as it says in the hymn *Jerusalem the golden*. The houses glow like gold ingots in the evening sun. You walk on and soon the city is behind the hill and in the distance you see the little white houses of Bethany village: *And he led them out as far as to Bethany and he lifted up his hands and he blessed them*. You read this verse and you realise that he still holds out his hands and his blessing is for you as well.

This is how Christ saves you and you come to know it beyond words. You know it in these stories that really happened. And they are real still. You are invited by Christ to become part of them. Look at St John's account of how Our Lord heals the horror and shame in Simon Peter following Peter's denial. This is perhaps the most affecting of all the Resurrection stories.

Jesus does not refer to Peter's denial. But you remember, Peter denied him three times. So now Jesus gently gives him three chances not to deny but to affirm. Three times he asks him, *Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?* Three times Peter declares his love and the denial is forgiven and the horrible curse of it removed. Imagine Peter's nightmares until this event. And Christ's gentle urgency in that quiet question repeated three times is as much a miracle of healing and restoration as the raising of Lazarus. *Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?* Put your own name in there. For Jesus is asking for your love

You don't need accountancy lessons in atonement theology and soteriology. You just need to walk into that room in Emmaus all in the April evening. You need to stand on the hill just over Gethsemane with the little white houses of Bethany coming into view. There you receive Christ's blessing:

Then shall your walk be close with God; calm and serene your frame; so purer light shall mark the road; that leads you to the Lamb