

## Jesus and the renewed community

Readings: Rom 6:3-11, Matt 28:1-10

Huffington Post reports:

If there is one defining quality of the West, it is individualism. Western individualism has no similar roots in any other civilization. Even cultures permeated by Western ideas and business, ... have not become individualistic in the Western way.<sup>1</sup>

That is a weird way to begin an Easter service! Aren't we are focusing on the Resurrection of Christ today? We need a sermon about the Easter events; one that provides good solid evidence too? Then, a challenge for us as individuals to become Christians; right?

It's very true that Jesus died and rose again for us to be reconciled to God. And yet that resulting friendship, is about so much more than just individuals 'being saved'.

Okay – brief overview:

First: the evidence bit – the Christian faith is based on a rational explanation the first Easter events. Investigative journalists have written very good books on the subject eg The Jesus Conspiracy and The Case for Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Colson, President Nixon's 'hatchet man', turned Christian says this:

I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.

Powerful testimony!

Second: the becoming a Christian bit – why wouldn't you?

Once I was asked why I was different to other people. (I think they meant in a positive way. ;) My answer: I know I am totally loved by God. It doesn't matter how often I stuff up or how I fail everyone else. I can never fail God because of what Jesus has done for me on the cross.

At age 17 I first-experienced Jesus' love for me. I had never known unconditional love before that. Jesus' amazing love has been consistent through all the ups and downs of life. Being Jesus' friend means more to me than anything else.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-koch/is-individualism-good-or-\\_b\\_4056305.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-koch/is-individualism-good-or-_b_4056305.html)

<sup>2</sup> The Case for Christ, Lee Strobel

Why wouldn't you want to give that unconditional love a shot? You won't find it anywhere else apart from in Jesus Christ. No-one will love you the way God does.

Okay, at Easter time, you'd expect any minister to give a rational and a personal argument for the benefits of following Jesus. But he is so worth following.

However Jesus died for much more than my life or the life of any other individual.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, our Maori culture is very different to Western, Pakeha culture. Maori are whanau, hapu and iwi based –much more like the Middle Eastern cultures of today and Jesus' day. Family and community are more important than any individual.

Here's the thing:

Jesus came to bring life to community; to society as a whole – not just to individuals!

In Christian-speak, we say Jesus came to bring in the Kingdom of God.

That upside-down Kingdom was enacted throughout the Easter story, actually the whole New Testament. Jesus came to turn community as it was upside down.

It would be easy to miss an important detail in our reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Today women can do anything (almost)!

Not so back then. A woman was unreliable. Women's testimony was not listened to in court. The fact that the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection are women is a huge shout out that things are going to be different around here!

Not only are they to be witnesses but they are to tell the men what to do!

"Yesss!" That isn't the point though. The point is that Jesus trusted women just as much as he did men. Radical back then!

Later on Jesus follower, the apostle Paul, wrote this:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile,  
slave or free,  
male and female.

For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:28

The old divisions no longer existed – they were null and void in God's new community.

Another important aspect of Jesus himself to note is that throughout the trial process Jesus never responded to attack. Back then, good oratory was highly prized. Arguments abounded. And Jesus had the gift of dynamic speaking along with the gift of miracles.

On his journey towards death Jesus used none of those weapons. Okay he did when one of his friends cut off a soldier's ear – he healed the soldier's ear. But aside from that Jesus offered no resistance.

God's new community was on its way.

Today's reading from Romans describes how Christ followers were, and are, aligned with Jesus in his death. Becoming Christ followers means dying to the old ways.

'Them' and 'us' don't exist now. Paul says we are 'no longer slaves to sin'. So we don't have to keep on doing bad stuff. As individuals we are free. And now, as a new community, we look at things way differently than we did before.

Paul continues:

Jesus died to break the power of sin. Now he lives for God's glory.

So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

The Roman church was part of God's new Kingdom, not just the individuals in the church, but the church as a whole.

Jesus talked about God's Kingdom during his lifetime. He said the least shall be the greatest and the greatest shall be the least. (Matthew 23:11)

Jesus expected that everything would change – not overnight. But he did expect that his followers would be changed, and that they would build a new community.

That community or Kingdom, won't be complete until Jesus comes again. But it's on its way. Sure Christians stuff up.

But consider some of the greatest reform movements throughout history. Many have been instigated by Christians. Sunday schools weren't just started to teach kids about Christianity – an important purpose was to give kids an education.

Robert Raikes, a Jesus follower, promoted Sunday schools in Britain in the 1780s. Then many kids spent six long days a week working in factories. (In 1802 their hours were limited to 12 each day!) Sunday was the only available time for these children to gain some education.

Other examples of Christians working hard to bring about God's Kingdom include the move to abolish slavery, hospital and prison reform.

Sure we Christians are far from perfect. We have done some horrible things in Jesus' name. We have broken his heart and gone against everything he tried to do for us and for our world. But that doesn't negate what Jesus came to do.

He came to turn the whole world upside down. He came to change hearts and minds and to transform society as a whole – to bring in the Kingdom of God.

Let's try and get past our individualistic culture. Jesus died and now lives to bring life to us and to our communities.

Reflection questions:

There was a great earthquake around the time of Jesus' resurrection. What needs to be shaken up in our society and/or our individual lives?

In the days of Christ, the witness of women was discounted. What people groups are discounted in our society today?

Jesus said to the women "Don't be afraid." What fears do you have for our world?

How can Jesus' words help?

Jesus died to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. What difference does his resurrection life make to society; to you?