

Raised to Authority

Readings: Acta 2:22-33 & Mark 9:30-32

There's some weird stuff in the Bible isn't there? Does anyone have any particular favourites?

I belong to an Internet forum called "The Ship of Fools" and one of the board members said this during a discussion that derailed it while we all had a laugh:

"Teeth like a flock of sheep... breasts like the twin fawns of a gazelle, spitting in mud and applying the mixture to someone's eyes, sticking your hands in someone's wounds... If someone at a party said those things, you'd edge slowly away."

But of all the strange and non-sensical bits of the bible, there's one that outstrips them all. How can a man be executed and then come back, in a strange body and hang around with people before disappearing up into the clouds?

We're in the middle of a sermon series focussing on the Apostles creed. Last week Susan very bravely took on the topic of death and Hell. This week we're focussing on the part of the creed that says:

On the third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

We're going to be delving into this statement a little deeper - particularly the bit about on the third day he rose again.

Jesus death, while tragic and senseless at least makes a kind of sense. The Romans had a tenuous grip on the province of Judea and couldn't afford a troublemaker. It's not nice, but I can see why it happened.

The resurrection however, doesn't fit with my experience, world-view or that way things normally work.

And while Jesus's death is important to us in Christian churches, the weird, nonsensical resurrection may be even more important.

In our death-obsessed culture it's often overlooked. It's easy to focus on the shocking death, fountains of blood, the ultimate act of sacrifice and leave the story there. But without the resurrection, Christianity makes absolutely no sense. It's completely critical to whether or not we're all wasting our time meeting here every Sunday. And to have our faith pivoting on such an unlikely event makes me feel a little uncomfortable.

Did it even happen?

As you can imagine, outside of the church this is very debatable. Even within the Church over the last 2000 years this has been kicked around, argued about and fought over.

The arguments boil down to three or four main ones. I'm not going to go through them here, but I do want to point out some of the arguments for why, if the disciples were going to make something up, they did a shoddy job.

As Susan explained last week, in the Greco-Roman world the main theory for what happened when you die is that you ended up in the underworld. Not hell. Not a place of punishment, just where everyone ended up after death. It was thought to be a dark and gloomy place where the residents had been reduced to vague shadowy flickers. They only had a very superficial recollection of their previous lives. Their bodies were gone, rotted away in the ground or cremated and all that was left of them was their souls, which just kind of hung around with no real sense of purpose.

There was no concept of resurrection. The dead lacked the strength and intelligence to do anything. They just existed down there outside time, frozen in appearance and stripped of all status, rank and purpose. Kind of like economy class on an international flight.

For a long time the Jewish faith had a similar concept of an afterlife in a place called Sheol. It resembled Hades pretty closely, a dark gloomy place full of the shadows of people. Over time though, different ideas about what happens to people when they die start to appear in the bible, and by the time the book of Daniel was written it was accepted that God would raise the dead and recreate their bodies - think of the field of bones coming back to life in Ezekiel

The story that the disciples told about the resurrection of Jesus bears no resemblance to any of those theories. It was a weird story, even in the context of the Jewish theory of resurrection, which was already pretty unique in the ancient world. People don't come back to life willy-nilly. When people died, they stayed dead. Even people in the 1st century knew that.

So when the disciples claimed that the prisoner who had been executed on Friday had popped back into life on Sunday, they weren't tapping into an existing idea or narrative. It sounded just as ridiculous back then as it would if someone suggested it now.

And then we have the first witnesses to the resurrection. Women. Notoriously unreliable, women. Not even allowed to testify in court in those days. Why on earth would you invent a story that relied on women being the first people to see it happen? You'd change that bit pretty quickly if you wanted people to take the story seriously, but it wasn't changed. Why? Because by the time the gospels were written down everybody knew that's how it had happened.

No, if the disciples had needed to make up a story, then they could have done a much better job.

The most likely explanation is that it happened pretty much as they said it did. Even the little inconsistencies between the gospels add to the impression that something very bizarre happened on Easter morning and as it was recorded over the years peoples' recollections didn't always match perfectly. The basic facts stayed the same though.

Jesus definitely died, and as Susan said last week, he entered the underworld. But the evidence points to the fact, he. came. back.

For the disciples and early Christians, this put a very different spin on Jesus and his ministry. This is the bit of information that moves Jesus past being a prophet and into something a whole lot more significant. If you were a people waiting for the Messiah, then this bit of information ticked a lot of boxes.

That's what the Acts reading is all about. Peter is preaching to a crowd, just after the events of pentecost and he's trying to explain what's going on. This is my paraphrase:

"Listen carefully to me: Jesus, you remember that man from Nazareth? He more than proved his heavenly credentials - remember all those miracles and signs? Well that Jesus, following God's plan, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. You had him executed! But God busted him out of death and raised him up. Death was no match for him."

Peter then references a Psalm 19 by David - the reason for this was that the Messiah had been the subject of a lot of prophecy and Peter wanted to show how Jesus's resurrection fitted into that prophecy. So, David says:

"I saw God before me for all time.
Nothing can shake me; he's right by my side.
I'm glad from the inside out, ecstatic;
I've pitched my tent in the land of hope.
I know you'll never dump me in Hades;
I'll never even smell the stench of death.
You've got my feet on the life-path,
with your face shining sun-joy all around."

Peter explains this psalm in this way:

"Actually, David didn't make it. He died and was buried just like everyone else. In fact his tomb is just over there. So what did David mean that he wouldn't be going to Hades? Well, David wasn't talking about himself. He was talking about the Messiah."

Peter then goes on to point out it was Jesus that God raised up. He was the one who escaped from the underworld and the group of apostles standing there were all witnesses to the fact. They had seen and experienced Jesus risen. And God went further than just raising him from death. Jesus was raised up to the right hand of God, actually to BE God, pouring out the spirit back on the world he had just left. There's no doubt about it. This Jesus that the crowd had all had killed, he's the master and Messiah they'd all been waiting for!

The crowd were obviously intrigued by this. The book of Acts says that people started asking "What do we do, now that we know this?" Peter baptised 3000 of them that day. The message had hit home.

If Jesus had simply died as a sacrifice, or as a ransom payment then it would all have ended there. Jesus's resurrection is the weird, nonsensical evidence that makes all of Christianity make sense. It proves that we're following God and not just an amazing man. We're part of a story that goes right back to prophecy in the Old Testament. This was the event that signalled the arrival of the Kingdom of God and started the clock ticking down to the end of days.

So what about us Holy Trinitarians or Church on the Hillians in our modern world, does this make any difference to us? We're familiar with Peter's sermon - if not the actual sermon than the content certainly isn't strange to us. We're all OK with the idea that Jesus is God and was the promised messiah. I'm also assuming that we're all OK with the idea that the resurrection really happened. How does this affect us in real life?

Well, there are a few implications. Firstly it might change how we feel about death.

Author Ken Collins puts it like this:

"Death cancels out everything. If you are rich, you die. If you are poor, you die. If you are famous, you die. If no one knows you are alive, you die. If you are good, you die. If you are evil, you die. If you are generous, you die. If you are miserly, you die. In other words, you are going to die. If the one who dies with the most toys wins, then I don't like the prize: a box, long enough for me to lie down in, six feet underground, and all my toys are given to the other kids who did not earn them."

Why would we spend any time on anyone else if this is all we get? Shouldn't we pushing ourselves to get as much as we can, or have as much fun as we can before we disappear back into the aether? Obviously we'd be wanting to pass our genes along, but then that kind of ends up in the fun basket too doesn't it? We certainly wouldn't be wanting to spend any time assisting other people at our own expense.

But we do.

Jesus's victory over death means that we're free to help others and think about people who aren't in our family or gene pool. We can be genuinely altruistic because we know this isn't the end of it all. Jesus told his disciples exactly that, and then he specifically asked them to spend their time here on earth looking after the rest of humanity. So all that work we do in our community, all that listening, feeding, making cups of tea. We do it because Jesus freed us from thinking of life as just the few decades we are allocated here on earth. We're all playing the long game and can look forward to eternity in his presence.

Secondly, if Jesus was who he said he was (and his resurrection pretty much seals the deal as far as evidence is concerned) then he really was God on earth. Not really news to us here at church, but if we stop to really think through the implications of that it starts to get quite heavy. The best evidence we have for how God would like us to behave is to examine the life of Jesus. This is a life-long quest for all of us, because those are some pretty big shoes to fill. Jesus meanwhile has assumed his rightful position as ruler of the universe.

The amazing thing for me is that this guy, who rules the universe, loved us so much that he put himself through the entire experience of being human - feeling the same feelings we do. Someone posted this to an internet forum that I belong to posted this:

"God shared our human nature and experienced all the brokenness, estrangement and isolation I have felt at various times in my life.

So even when I am at my lowest, when I feel like no one understands the pain I am going through, God is there. God has experienced it. Rather than feeling further condemned by God

for being human, having flaws and having those low moments, I feel closer to God because we have had a shared experience, and at those moments I feel God's healing presence.

That is what the Incarnation means to me."

This God, who experienced life completely as a human is now in charge. So we can be sure that no matter how we feel, Jesus knows and understands.

So when we say the Apostles creed and we say the words

"On the third day he rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven,

And sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty"

We take take huge comfort from them because what we're really saying is:

Jesus, the guy who spent time as a human turned out to actually be God. He broke us out of death's prison, went back to where he actually belongs, looking after the universe and keeping a loving eye on us.

If that isn't some good news then I don't know what is!