

Easter Day 2010

John 20:1-9

“He saw the linen cloths lying; and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.” John 20:6-7

The great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is rarely thought of as a friend of Christianity. In fact, it is he who supplied one of the most famous of all philosophical quotes, “God is dead”. Most people also know the words, “and we have killed him”, but the quotation’s common form misses out three other words. It should read “God is dead, God remains dead, and we have killed him.” Without the middle section, that quotation could be said by any Christian on Good Friday. God is dead and we have killed him. And that is true. This morning, however, we are here not to agree with, but to contradict Nietzsche, for whilst the appalling reality of the cross means that God is dead, and we have killed him, the gospel of the resurrection emphatically declares that whilst God was dead, he does not remain so.

Another of Nietzsche’s famous aphorisms concerns looking into the abyss. When you look into an abyss, the abyss looks into you. In context, the philosopher is warning us that that which we seek to oppose and combat, will inevitably have its effect on us. In order to know something so as to confront it, we must come to terms with it, and we cannot do that without being affected.

“When you look into an abyss, the abyss looks into you.” Our gospel reading this morning concerns looking into an abyss. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark Mary Magdalen went to the tomb, and found the stone rolled away. She immediately, and understandably, assumes that somebody has stolen the body of Jesus. She runs to Peter and the other disciples with this news: they have taken the Lord away and we do not know where they have put him. She reacts to the absence of his body in the way that one would expect. Graves, tombs, contained bodies. If the body is absent, then someone must have removed it. The absence of the body of Jesus is clearly not, as far as the gospel writers are concerned, the proof of his resurrection. And neither should it be, for what confronts Mary in that darkness is in fact, a nothing, an absence, an abyss.

Peter and the beloved disciple hear this news and run to find out what has happened. The beloved disciple is a young man, he outsprints Peter and gets there first, he looks inside and sees the linen cloths, but he doesn’t go in. Peter, with the authority of the chief of the disciples, catches up and enters: he then sees the shroud which had been wrapped around the body of Jesus, and he also sees the cloth which had been wound round his head. These pieces of linen are neatly stowed, folded up, and placed apart from one another. What is the significance of this? For the fourth gospel, it is clearly a contrast with

the raising of Lazarus, who comes out of the tomb and needs to be unbound from his shroud. Lazarus was called back to life, rather as a resuscitated corpse, or if you like in a more contemporary reference, as a sort of Frankenstein's monster into whom life is placed by the power of another. But the resurrection of Jesus is not about the resuscitation of a corpse. By including these seemingly irrelevant details about the cloths which had wrapped Jesus body, the evangelist is alerting us to the dangers of trying to study and understand this, the event which changes history.

The problem with the resurrection of Jesus, is our desire to see it as one event among others. But it is no accident that nowhere in the New Testament is the resurrection of Jesus described. All that is described is the discovery, that the resurrection has taken place, and that the response to it on the part of Jesus disciples. It follows from this that the resurrection is just as much an event about you and me, as it is an event about Jesus of Nazareth. If we reduce it to a magic trick, a resuscitated corpse, a clever knockdown proof that Jesus was right all along, then it is simply one event among others. However, what the Christian gospel proclaims is that the resurrection is not so much an event in history, as an event beyond history, the one event by which every other event, the whole of human history, must be understood. It is the decisive event, by which the creative power of God really orders the whole of creation, so that nothing is ever the same, and nothing

can now be understood, without reference to this one extraordinary set of circumstances.

When you look into an abyss, the abyss looks into you. Mary Magdalen and Peter and the beloved disciple stare into the absence, which is the empty tomb of Jesus. The last verse of gospel reading is important. For as yet they did not know the Scripture that he must rise from the dead. They are, in other words, still in their ignorance. The absence of God is just that, an absence; it presents them with nothing except a question or a challenge. But it is a question and a challenge, which means that things will never be the same, an absence which looks into them even as they look into it.

“God is dead and we have killed him.” Perhaps, but God does not remain dead, in fact, God does not remain anything; God does not rest, does not stay. The tomb is empty, because God is not static, not lifeless, but quite the opposite: God is life itself, and life will not be contained. In Luke's gospel Mary and her companions are greeted by two mysterious figures who ask them “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The resurrection which we proclaim is the final and ultimate sign that our attempts to pin God down, to control him, wrap him up in a place, a book, a hierarchy and even a person, will never be enough. Having fallen flat on our faces when we thought that love was dead, we are now confounded one more wonderful time by the refusal

of God to play games, to gloat in his victory, to stand and take the applause which we are all too ready to give.

When you look into an abyss, the abyss looks into you. The empty tomb of Jesus, greets our blind and blinking eyes as they emerge from the darkness of Good Friday. It confronts that absence of God, with another absence of God. It confronts the death of everything, with the life which is now found in nothing, in absence, in the abyss, which is our attempt to bury the love of God. It demands that we respond, that we follow, that we live the life given to us all, the life which means that nothing will ever be the same. For indeed, nothing will ever be the same. Nothing will ever be more than absence and emptiness and abyss. But if nothing will ever be the same, then it follows that everything has changed and everything is what bursts forth from the nothing of that tomb on this triumphant day.

Christ is risen – He is risen indeed

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