3rd Sunday of Easter 2024

In the year 51 AD, St Paul was in Athens, the centre of Greek civilisation. While there he took the opportunity to address the leading citizens, and spoke to them about the death of Jesus Christ and his subsequent rising from the dead. We are told that, *“At this mention of rising from the dead, some of them burst out laughing” (Acts 17:52).* And why wouldn’t they? The assertion that a dead man had come back to life was just as ridiculous then, as it is for many in our society today. Yet, this is the central claim on which Christianity utterly relies, otherwise our faith is pointless – St Paul put it bluntly, but very succinctly, *“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (1Cor. 15:17).*

The implications are clear: if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then his claim to speak and act in the person of God, would be false; the Eucharist and the other sacraments would be meaningless; the Church, at best, would be just another human organisation; and in vain would be our hope for a future beyond death. Were such a scenario true, our faith would indeed be futile! *“But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead” (1Cor.15:20)* – this is the truth on which our faith entirely depends. Yet, it is understandable, based on human experience alone, why people, then and now, find it, not only difficult, but often impossible, to believe in the Resurrection of Jesus.

At that time there were essentially two views of what happened to someone after death. One regarded death as simply the end – the person decays and returns to the earth, and nothingness. The Gospels record that this was the understanding of the Sadducees, as they *“maintained that there was no resurrection” (Mark 12:18).* However, many people, perhaps influenced by classical pagan thinking, believed in the existence of a shadowy place referred to as “Sheol” where the “shades” or “ghosts” of the dead remained. Perhaps this explains why when *Jesus “stood among them…. they thought they were seeing a ghost”.* The Pharisees had a more developed understanding, believing that, at the end of time, there would be a general resurrection of the dead, and the righteous would be raised bodily. However, such thoughts had absolutely no implications for that event which the Gospels refers to as “The Resurrection of Jesus”.

The Gospels make clear that the death of Jesus was not his end – he was alive and with them; nor was he a ghost consigned to Sheol – in his own words, *“see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have”.* The first witnesses to the Resurrection were reporting something unique, and beyond their experience and understanding. The Jesus whom they knew, who was crucified, died, and was buried, was now no longer dead, but alive - the Gospel recounts that, when *“Jesus stood among them……they could not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded”.* But later, St Peter, as recounted in today’s first reading, could simply state*, “you killed the prince of life. God, however, raised him from the dead, and to that fact we are the witnesses”*. Those witnesses were so definite about the Lord’s resurrection, that they were prepared to suffer martyrdom defending it.

All of this set the Apostles minds reeling, as it does ours! What kind of person were they now looking at? In answer, all they could do was relate the unusual qualities which Jesus' risen glorified body now demonstrated – he was the same as before, but somehow different; he could appear and disappear; he could enter a closed room. He was physical – he could take a piece of grilled fish and eat it; but in another sense, transformed, not entirely of this world!

So, what had happened? In his risen body Jesus had defeated death. He had not simply come back from the dead, but rather, he had gone beyond death into a new glorified creation. His resurrected body was not a resuscitated body, as, for example, that of Lazarus. Resurrection is entirely different from resuscitation. The Resurrection was a divine act of re-creation, by which Jesus' physical earthly body was transformed into a physical heavenly body – or as St. John would say, a glorified body.

This Jesus promised, *“I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too” (Jn. 14: 3)*. Our bodies are not only marvels of creation, but are destined for resurrection, destined to rise beyond the grave to a new embodied life in God - destined for glory! For this reason every human person is deserving of profound respect and reverence. These thoughts stretch our minds, particularly as they are conditioned by our many limitations – but this is the challenge of Easter! It is said that the Resurrection of Jesus should be seen not as a one-off exception to the law of nature, but a revelation of the true law of nature, as God intended it to be!

*“May you be blessed, Lord Jesus,*

*because your resurrection is the hope of our resurrection,*

*and the glory that will clothe us on the last day,*

*reflects that which clothed you*

*on Easter morning.”* **Amen.**