

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Easter Message

We have a certain temptation about the meaning of Easter which we should try our best to resist. Snagging on to the theme of conflict between Jesus and the authorities, we have a tendency to see Jesus as concerned with earthly power, tussling with Jerusalem or Rome. That understanding is misconceived, because it sees the Cross itself only in human terms. As we've been stressing, the real meaning of the Cross is between the Son and the Father, irrespective of what the Cross means to earthlings.

If the Passion were a fight between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, we might become anti-Semitic. If it were a struggle between Jesus and Rome we might become Zealots. But if it is an act of loving obedience between Son and Father, we need a much more careful response. Some points about the Resurrection:

- **Jesus does not “come back to life”.** To see the Resurrection as a *return* would not get humanity any nearer to God. Jesus' friend Lazarus *returned to life* in this sense: but he didn't enter the world of the resurrection, and would die again.
- **The Risen Jesus is still “the Crucified One”.** The death of Jesus isn't a temporary pretence, from which he escapes. It marks him permanently: the risen Lord still bears the wounds of the Cross *as his sign of identity*: “Jesus said *Peace be with you*, and showed them his hands and his side.”
- **Jesus is not a ghost.** The disciples find real flesh and bones which they touch. We must avoid any trace of superstition in our understanding of Easter. Jesus' death is the ultimate reality of his earthly body; his death was real and true, like his humanity. This means that we should not try to “rub it out” of the record; it remains the heart of the Christian message for humanity.
- **The Incarnation Is Permanent** The risen body which appeared to the disciples was a real human body, though a glorified one, in other words one opened to the divine life. This means that, in some way we cannot intellectually explore, there is now a (glorified) human body in the heart of the Godhead for all eternity. This means, for instance, that the human race itself is now eternal, at one with the eternity of God. (That is a change for us, but it does not change God, to whom nothing can be added, from whom nothing can be taken away.)

We need to keep the above in mind before we attempt to spell anything out about Easter. When the Lord instructs the disciples after the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels, he says: *Tell no one the vision until the Son of Man be risen from the dead.* Luke tells us: *They observed the warning faithfully, though amongst themselves they discussed what “rising from the dead” might mean.* We aren't the first, then, to be confused and uncertain in this field. Whatever the Resurrection is, it isn't easy to understand, and any simplistic explanation is likely to be wrong.

Some Resurrection Questions

1 Why does the risen Jesus “appear, not to the whole people, but to certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand” (*Acts 10:40*)? What value prevents him from (*mutatis mutandis*) “going public on national television”?

2 Why is “seeing” the risen Christ different from the familiar experience of “seeing” Jesus of Nazareth?

(Suggestions: they had watched the Crucifixion and knew that he was dead; it is hard to see someone living whom you certainly have seen dead.

But even that hardly accounts for the fact that two deeply committed disciples, devastated by his loss, can apparently walk beside him all day and talk with him about the Calvary experience, without recognising him.

Mary of Magdala saw him through her tears. His voice, calling her by name, reveals him.

Other signs of strangeness can be detected in the other Gospels:

Matthew remarkably says: *When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated.*

There is also the strange phrase in Mark’s appendix: *he showed himself under another form to two of them on their way to the country.*

Luke’s Jesus is greeted with incredulity, so that he has to offer them his hands to explore, and then eats a piece of fish while they look on.

Peter conducts a (rather distant) conversation with him in the Johannine appendix, and they net the miraculous draught of fish, before the Beloved Disciple says, *It is the Lord.*)

The *incredulity* of the disciples is actually a mark of genuineness: they were quite unprepared for what happened at Easter, and therefore are less likely to have invented it, as the Jewish authorities claimed. If we were preparing a story for public consumption, we would scarcely have drawn the principle witnesses in such a bad light.

3 Have you any thoughts about what a “risen” body could be like? What is the meaning you draw from the presence of the wounds of the Cross in his hands, feet, and side?

4 How hard to you find it to believe in “the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting”?

What questions arise in your mind?