

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, CANBERRA

EASTER DAY, SUNDAY, 8 APRIL 2007, 9 am and 10.30 am

NOTES FOR SERMON

Rev Prof James Haire

Readings:

Psalm 118: 1, 14 – 24

1 Corinthians 15: 19 – 26

John 20: 1 – 18

Additional Readings:

Isaiah 65: 17 – 25

Luke 24: 1 - 12

Acts 10: 34 – 43

My text for today is 1 Corinthians 15:20: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” (NRSV)

First, we must deal with the issue of the **Resurrection of Jesus**. What does it mean? What was the nature of Jesus’ appearance? Clearly he is not just a resurrected corpse. However, he is also not just a disembodied spirit. There is a connection between the past and the present. They know who he is. They know this because of what Thomas sees. He recognises the wounds which are the result of the crucifixion. Mary too, in the garden, knows who he is. She hears his voice. In the cameo, he says “Mariam!”, and she says “Rabbouni!” (which in Aramaic means “My Teacher”, or “The Head of my Teaching and Nurturing Group”). It reminds us of the passage: “My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me”.

Mary is absolutely faithful. The male disciples have run away, but she keeps on looking for him. And she seems to believe in him, regardless of what she will eventually find. The point about Jesus’ resurrection is that there is **continuity with the past and also discontinuity**. It is the same Jesus whom they have known in the past. Yet, however, his body is now divine, for he can appear to them after passing through walls, when the doors are locked. But they know that it is him.

Second, this is meaningful to us if we see it against the **background of Hebrew thought rather than of Greek thought**. In Hebrew thought, Jesus' resurrection is a kind of **new creation**. This general new creation begins with the resurrection of Jesus. That is why all Christians who are in Christ share in God's new creation in Christ, that is in Christ's resurrection. Christ is the first fruits of this total creation. A new creation has taken place. The old creation had Adam as its head and that led to death, because of Adam's disobedience. This new creation is headed by Christ, who is absolutely obedient to the will of the Father and trusts in the Father, so that all of us who are in Christ are part of this new creation. Hebrew thought points to new creation, while Greek thought has the problem that the unearthly is always superior to the earthly, the spiritual always superior to, and divorced from, the material. Therefore, in Greek thought, a person's essence is their spirit, or their character is their spirit. And this permeates the Western thought, of which like it or not we are the heirs in our dominant culture here.

Third, in Hebrew thought, God is sovereign, and the earthly, the material, is valued. Therefore, the continuity of the past with a new form is important. **A new world has begun** with the resurrection of Jesus, and we are caught up in that world. Just as the Spirit of God came upon the world at the first creation, so the Holy Spirit comes again in this new creation. God breaks through. And in John's gospel, the Spirit is given by the risen Jesus. The risen Jesus, the first sign and the means of the new creation, breathes the Spirit. There is no drama, no bells and whistles, as there are in Acts 2, the Spirit is just breathed upon them.

Fourth, in relation to time, the reign of Christ begins with the **resurrection** and lasts until Christ's second coming. The Kingdom of Christ is the same as the period of the Church, or church history. Oscar Cullmann, the Swiss expert on time in the New Testament, puts it this way: "In chronological respect (not in spatial respect), the kingly rule of Christ and the church completely coincide". So the period of the church is one of struggle with those opposed to Christ's rule. At the end, Christ delivers all of this to the Father, the Creator of All. During the period of the church, all is done **through Christ**, but, at the end, Christ hands over everything to the Father.

To understand this passage, we need to have a clear picture of the early church's concept of time. It understood it as a middle point. On the one hand, some Christians, influenced by a movement called Gnosticism, thought that Christians had already arrived at the end of history, at what we would call after the Second Coming. They believed that the Second

Coming already existed. On the other hand, there were other Christians who thought that not much had happened in time terms, expect that Jesus had died and had now returned. It was as if his death and resurrection were a temporary blip. In the middle of these two, Paul puts forward the Christian position. It is this: with Jesus' resurrection, a new time-period has begun. God has instituted a **new period of creation** and those in Christ have entered a world of permanent security with God in Christ. Christ, as the first fruits, will lead them to that. However, after this period of the church, there will be a final ending of all things, when Christ will hand over the redeemed world to the Father.

There will not be another period of communal Christian gloating on the fate of the unfortunate. Rather it is this period of struggle, the end of which is certain. Other language of the NT calls this the Kingdom of God, so that when we pray, "Thy / Your Kingdom Come", because this is still a period of struggle, for faith, for justice, and for righteousness. Our self-absorbed and self-centred world in the West stands in great contrast to this vision for the future. Because it is self-centred, it can not see God's Kingdom, and so ends up as a sad and futile world, made continually futile by its own self-obsessed cleverness.

However, in fact, the message of the resurrection is one of **hope and certainty** for the future, particularly for all who believe.