

# *resurrection & healing*

a sermon preached on the

*third sunday of easter*

10 April 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 9:1-6, Psalm 30, Revelation 5:6-14, John 21:1-19

John's gospel came to a conclusion at the end of chapter 20.<sup>1</sup> It had all been said: "Resurrection frees us from the need to cling to the physical; resurrection reveals life that cannot be bound by a tomb or the grave cloths... resurrection is an invitation to step into the life of the transforming spirit, and the ultimate blessing of resurrection comes to those who do not see physical evidence and yet who believe."<sup>2</sup> What more is there to say!

Many scholars conclude that chapter 21 is a later addition. It does not comfortably follow chapter 20.<sup>3</sup> After the apparently life-transforming appearances in Jerusalem, why an anti-climactic return to the old pre-Jesus Galilean fishing life?<sup>4</sup> How is it that there are suddenly only 7 disciples<sup>5</sup> – instead of the traditional 11? Why the introduction of a whole new set of themes? Why does a 'second coming' motif<sup>6</sup> get inserted here, when in the thrust of John's gospel it is clear that the evangelist considers the gift of the Holy Spirit as the second coming of Jesus?<sup>7</sup> Why does a Galilee fishing story told by Luke – with far more similarities than differences<sup>8</sup> – which in Luke's narrative belongs to the early ministry of Jesus,<sup>9</sup> get tacked on as a gospel epilogue? The legendary biblical scholar Raymond Brown – in his benchmark commentary on John – devotes no fewer than 67 pages to examining in great detail the host of issues raised by chapter 21.<sup>10</sup>

The most striking new theme in chapter 21 is leadership and authority in the disciple community. Throughout John's gospel it is 'the Beloved disciple' who has so clearly been the pre-eminent follower of Jesus<sup>11</sup> – poignantly and movingly portrayed especially in the depictions of "the one whom Jesus loved... reclining next to him",<sup>12</sup> and in Jesus' dying words from the cross to his mother about "the disciple whom he loved", "Woman, here is your son".<sup>13</sup> "Johannine Christians, represented by the Beloved Disciple, clearly regard themselves as closer to Jesus and more perceptive than the churches who claim Peter and the twelve as their apostolic authority".<sup>14</sup>

Yet, suddenly, everything seems to be reversed! Peter, who has not received great 'press' in John's gospel, is now given prominent place. This resurrection meeting between Jesus and the Peter – who had previously betrayed him three times,<sup>15</sup> and is now invited to declare his undivided love for Jesus three times<sup>16</sup> – is profoundly evocative, memorable, and deeply moving. Jesus *didn't* ask Peter: 'Do you believe in me?' Or 'Did you read my book?' Rather, his question places love at the centre.

Certainly, we can be thankful indeed for this beautiful discourse which so firmly places love as the centre and ground of Christian discipleship and authority. And yet – leaving aside the thorny and centuries-long argument, as to whether this chapter justifies the Church of Rome's claims to 'Petrine authority' over all Christians<sup>17</sup> – it is clear that chapter 21's love motif is polluted by the rise of rivalry.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:30-31

<sup>2</sup> John S Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p307.

<sup>3</sup> cf. 20:31 with 21:1

<sup>4</sup> John 21:1,3 The names 'Tiberias' and 'Galilee' refer to the same Sea.

<sup>5</sup> John 21:2

<sup>6</sup> John 21:22-23

<sup>7</sup> John 3:5ff, 4:13-14, 6:63, 13-14, 15:26, 16:7,15, 20-22,25, 20:22

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII – XXI*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p1090.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 5:1-11

<sup>10</sup> Raymond E Brown, pp1065-1132.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983, p325.

<sup>12</sup> John 13:23, 21:20

<sup>13</sup> John 19:26

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, p326.

<sup>15</sup> John 18:17,25,27

<sup>16</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>17</sup> Raymond E Brown, pp1095-1098.

<sup>18</sup> John 21:21

But I want to return to my introduction today: ‘Resurrection frees us from the need to cling to the physical; revealing life that cannot be bound by a tomb... an invitation to step into the life of the transforming spirit, its ultimate blessing to those who do not see physical evidence and yet who believe.’ In light of this beautiful *evangelion*, the rivalry is surely all the more tragic.

And, as I have suggested at various times, herein lies a serious impediment to Christianity’s mission. ‘Mission’ remains captive to a mentality that carves the world up: between ‘in’ and ‘out’; ‘saved’ or ‘unsaved’; ‘Christian’ or ‘non-Christian’. Some of those at the Communion and Curry on Wednesday night were shocked by the tone of gospel of the day: “Those who do not believe in [the Son] are condemned already”.<sup>19</sup> Their shock was that it sounded so like the rhetoric of Islamic State. Yes indeed, the divisiveness of Islam is a mirror image of the divisiveness of Christianity – and our mutual healing will depend on our eventual honesty about this unpalatable fact.

We are inheritors of two millennia of Christian understandings of ‘mission’ which perpetuate division, partly because that was the philosophical ground out of which all the Abrahamic faiths sprouted, which made Saul’s church-bashing excursion to Damascus<sup>20</sup> perfectly ‘normal’ in a world where a person was digitally either a member of the family, or *Goyim*, ‘Gentile’, outsider. Dividedness is written into our shared cultural DNA, long before anyone had even heard of ‘Abrahamic faiths’: “Ever since [humankind] reflected, and the more [we] reflected, the opposition between spirit and matter has constantly risen up as an ever higher barrier across the road that climbs up to a better awareness of the universe: and in this lies the *deep-rooted origin of all our troubles*.”<sup>21</sup>

The philosophical name of this human problem is *dualism*. From Plato to Descartes, through the three Abrahamic faiths, to contemporary materialistic science, the assertion of an irreconcilable split – between matter and spirit, consciousness and the material body, earth and heaven, and so on – has plagued us in every aspect of life. One philosopher has described this universal deep-rooted dualism as ‘a kind of original sin’.<sup>22</sup>

I suppose it’s not surprising, then, that the Christian mission simply found itself sucked into this ancient dualism. Paul simply swapped sides: from persecuting Christians, to creating a new set of ‘unbelievers’!<sup>23</sup> In no time at all the churches set about sacralising and concretising texts such as the one that shocked the faithful on Wednesday evening, and which is on full display in today’s Petrine versus Johannine tussle. And so long as Christians continue to use sacralised biblical texts to ‘convert’ people of other faiths we may well remain stuck in our original sin – our ‘missionary’ activity an ongoing threat to global peace and security.

If this assessment bears any truth, then the Christian missionary task – the feeding of our Lord’s sheep<sup>24</sup> – *in our time* calls for the healing of our own deep-seated dualism. In this calling we may find ourselves being taken where we do not wish to go.<sup>25</sup> We ourselves would become the focus of missionary endeavour – seeking to become ourselves more Christlike, to be people of resurrection.

For resurrection frees us from the need to cling to our formulas; resurrection reveals life that cannot be bound by books or buildings... resurrection is an invitation to step into the life of the transforming spirit who ‘blows where she will’<sup>26</sup>, and the ultimate blessing of resurrection comes to those who see no physical evidence for this and yet who take the risk of living into its future.

We could add: resurrection frees us from the deep-seated original sin of dualism – as Paul, in spite of his commitment to a dualist human community, does seem to have intuited with regard to the ministry of Christ<sup>27</sup> – from all compulsion to rend asunder again that which Christ has joined. The reconciling of matter and Spirit; earth and heaven; ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’.

That is, resurrection is the life-giving Spirit’s gift that enables us to be healed from ‘original sin’: so as to be and to see and to pray with Jesus, “that they may be one, as we are one... that they may become completely one”.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John 3:18

<sup>20</sup> Acts 9:1-2

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘The Atomism of Spirit’, in **Activation of Energy**, London: William Collins, 1970, p23. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Stan V McDaniel, ‘Jung, Teilhard, and the Psychological Problem of Dualism’, in Fred R Gustafson (ed), **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Carl Gustav Jung Side by Side**, Cheyenne: Fisher King Books, 2015, p52.

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Paul’s use of the term ‘unbeliever’ in the Corinthian correspondence.

<sup>24</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>25</sup> John 21:18

<sup>26</sup> John 3:8

<sup>27</sup> Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>28</sup> John 17:11,23