

Third Sunday of Easter

22 April 2012

John Dunnill

Acts 3: 12-20; 1 John 2: 15-17 and 3: 1-6; Luke 24: 36b – 48

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

'When I was eight years old I saw General de Gaulle in a dressing gown'.

Sadly, the 'I' in that sentence is not me, but the novelist Penelope Lively. In her autobiography she writes about her childhood, in an English family living in Egypt, where her father was a prominent banker. A happy childhood was disrupted by war, and in 1942, as the German army threatened Cairo, her family moved for safety to Jerusalem, where they stayed in the British Governor's Residence.

One morning, peeping round the door of her bedroom, she saw disappearing into the bathroom, the unmistakeable figure of Colonel Charles de Gaulle, as he then was, the famous and dashing leader of the Free French Army, instantly recognisable from pictures in the newspapers and on newsreels.

And yet all the records insist that he was not there. Doing research for her autobiography, fifty years later, Penelope Lively discovered that all the historians agree that at that time he was in fact in a command position in Beirut, several hundred miles to the north. He *had* been in Jerusalem at other times, earlier and later, but not then. So was she mistaken?

But she had two memories. One was being told by the Governor's wife that they had a 'special guest' staying, and they were not to mention him to any one. And the other was a clear visual imprint of a well known face and a pair of long white legs beneath a blue silk dressing gown. Whatever secret negotiations or strategies had brought him to Jerusalem it seemed that she accidentally knew something that was completely off the record.

The Gospel story tells of another event (also as it happens in Jerusalem) when a group of people saw with their own eyes someone who could not possibly have been there, Jesus the crucified one. They knew Jesus was dead: they had stood at a safe distance, Luke tells us (23: 49), and watched his death. They knew where he had been buried. And yet here he was.

Decades later when the story was written down, you can still feel the rawness of the shock of encountering a dead man walking: 'startled and terrified', 'they must be seeing a ghost', a phantasm of their imagining. It was a person they recognised, and yet didn't dare to recognise: the implications were too terrifying. Even when he provides proof, Luke tells us they were 'disbelieving for joy' and wondering at a hope that was both too terrifying and too good to be true.

But there he was, no ghost but, as he shows them, 'flesh and bones'. 'Flesh and bones' is an evocative phrase, a phrase which takes us back to what the Bible records as the first human words. When God brought to Adam the companion he longed for, the woman formed from his rib, he exclaimed: 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'. They are words rich with longing for companionship and full of the delight of recognition, words which inaugurate the first marriage and the first human community. Their meaning is echoed in our marriage service, when two people are joined together and become 'one flesh', a new kinship.

And now Jesus, as he inaugurates a new humanity and a new community, uses these words to invite his friends to the same recognition, the kinship that he has with them as bone of their bones and flesh of their flesh. In death as in life, Jesus shares with them their fundamental humanity, which is not set aside in the new order but transformed.

Easter begins as an event of recognition of this truth in this person. Like it or not, the *event* of Easter is not to be passed by, if resurrection is to be more than a dream or a hope or an ideal.

The story is so strange the Gospel writers hardly know how to tell it. It was the Jesus they knew, and yet somehow changed; he was bone and flesh and yet somehow different; he was with them and yet somehow moving beyond them. Yet they had to record that event – however hard it was to tell, however seemingly unconvincing their accounts – because something had happened, once, which altered for all time their understanding of themselves, and of what it meant to be 'bone and flesh'.

It was of course more than a curious memory. So at this point we have to leave General de Gaulle behind. Whether or not a small girl was right about who she thought she saw in a blue Paisley dressing gown, and whatever military secret she had stumbled on, it didn't affect her life much at the time and doesn't matter now.

But the first Christians proclaimed the resurrection not because they remembered an isolated fact but because through the event they had been given an experience which transformed their lives.

The resurrection was and is an *event of recognition*. It was Jesus their master, the crucified one, the same however changed; it was Jesus coming to them out of some strange place, and yet sharing their flesh and bones.

But it was more: what they recognised in Jesus, and in the human form of Jesus (his bones and his flesh), and in his strangeness, was the one who was GOD for them, the desire of their heart and fount of all love.

They saw him, now more than ever, as the Shalom, the Peace of God, the healing of all ills, the forgiving of all sins. Jesus is for us also, if we can recognise him, the Shalom, the Peace of God to which all hopes of earthly peace point, the healing of all ills, the forgiving of all sins.

The Good news of the resurrection is that God who became one with us, shared our bone and our flesh, has raised up our bone and flesh into the radiance of new life, and invited us to go on sharing with Jesus in his transformed state.

St Paul says, astonishingly, that we are risen too. He tells the Colossians, 'You were buried with him in baptism and you were raised with him also, through the faithful empowering of God who raised him from the dead' (Col 2: 12).

Risen in him, risen with him, in freedom from the downward drag of sin, anxiety and fear. Is that a reality we have discovered in our lives? – a truth lurking underneath sin, anxiety and fear; a place in our heart where we sometimes discover God is transforming those things of darkness into light?

All this presupposes that we too have *recognised* Jesus, not only as our teacher, and as the crucified one, but as the one in whom new life has become actual, and through him new life becomes actual for us also.

If we are to recognise Jesus we have to know him. How do we do that? The history of God's people suggests three ways. There is first Scripture, the story of God's dealings with humankind, which contains many things (so it's often confusing, and makes us think) but at its heart is the story of how God draws bone and flesh into his friendship, first some, then all. Jesus told his disciples that the scriptures point to him, and we need to find that for ourselves. If we find Jesus here, in the story, we shall know him when we meet him.

Secondly, there is the community of God's people among whom we live. I hope and believe that the peace of Jesus is to be found among us, and others who follow his way – in how we deal with one another, in the hope we set before each other, and in the bread and wine which is the sign of our sharing. Do we recognise him in the breaking of the bread?

Thirdly there is the daily openness to God's presence in our lives through some practice of prayer, of meditation, of inner awareness, whatever form we choose to practice. We are called, by one means or another, to open ourselves, to let our heart and mind be renewed, to become ready to greet him when he makes himself present to us.

Scripture, community, prayer: three paths to walk in union with Jesus, the one who uniquely *was* dead and *is* alive, the stranger who speaks to us in our heart's core, the one who calls us to recognise him as our Peace, and to walk with him into new and richer life.

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