Easter 3 10 April 2016

For a clergyman the Easter season can seem too long: in the sense that the preacher is confronted every Sunday with a new resurrection story to make sense of. And unless you recognise the literary nature of these pieces it becomes more and more difficult to know what to say. Someone wrote in a newspaper article, ‘The resurrection is not a proposition, it’s Christianity’s word for resistance.’ And that seemed to me to get it in a nutshell. It’s a refusal of defeat, hope in adversity, and, in an ugly Prayer Book phrase, newness of life.

Today’s story of the miraculous catch of fish, from John’s Gospel, of course also appears in Luke as an event from Jesus’ earthly ministry, in which Jesus uses Peter’s boat as a platform from which to teach the crowds. And when he has finished, he tells the men to row out and cast their nets into deep water. Peter protests that they haven’t caught anything all night, but he obeys and they pull in so many fish that their boats begin to sink. Then Jesus tells them they will soon become fishers of men. So this tale is clearly a missionary parable about passing on the teachings of Jesus and winning souls for the kingdom of God.

Whereas the version in St John features a Jesus who is not recognised, a similar account of the great catch of fish, and then a sort of 8 o’clock Eucharist in which Jesus is recognised as he breaks bread and shares fish, just as he was recognised in the Eucharist at Emmaus.

So it’s very likely that one day on the Sea of Galilee the disciples did have an amazing catch of fish that everyone talked about; and this became a widely used illustration in the preaching of the first Christians. Just like we often refer to the truth and reconciliation movement in South Africa, or Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech today when we want to illustrate the priorities of the Christian gospel. The miraculous draught of fishes is therefore not intended so much to make you gasp with golly/gosh type astonishment, as to see that the energy of Jesus persists in the preaching and Eucharistic life of the Church. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians, ‘Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.’

When I was a child there weren’t many jokes in church. But I remember a dry Scottish preacher, from Emmanuel Church in Cambridge, imagining a situation in which Peter becomes more and more exasperated with Jesus, until he eventually stomps out muttering, ‘I go a-fishing’. The humour, I realised even then, was significantly in the memorable archaism a-fishing, from this same resurrection story. There was only one other such construction known to me – the nursery rhyme,

A frog he would a-wooing go,  
Heigh ho! says Rowley,  
Whether his mother would let him or no.  
With a rowley, powley\*, gammon, and spinach,  
Heigh ho! says Anthony Rowley.

And in the second pericope, or chunk of gospel, that was read this morning, Peter *does* become exasperated with Jesus as he is repeatedly asked whether he loves him. Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ But Jesus had every right to press the question because Peter had denied him three times on the night of his betrayal. And this story is set there in John’s Gospel to right that wrong and to re-instate Peter as the apostle and martyr fit to hold the keys of the kingdom and to be the first Bishop of Rome.

One of my immediate projects for the future is to write a commentary on each of the thirty poems and pieces collected together over ten years for our Good Friday readings. It will be a kind of reflection on Passiontide – both a resource, I hope, and a fresh theology. My inspiration for the format is Alan Bennett’s ‘Six Poets – Hardy to Larkin’. What I like about Bennett is his down-to-earth approach: he says that there’s much of W H Auden, for example, that he simply doesn’t understand. And one poem that he includes (which I won’t) is Auden’s ‘In Memory of W B Yeats’. It concludes with the famous lines, also inscribed on Auden’s tomb in Westminster Abbey:

‘In the prison of his days/Teach the free man how to praise’

I’m not sure I understand that, but I have a hunch it might add to my take on the resurrection. I want it to say that praise will set the prisoner free; (but it doesn’t quite do that); that we are trapped in the days that must end in death, but to stand in awe and delight at *what is* will be liberation. The resurrection stories are tales of awe and astonishment: empty tomb – incredible, Jesus encountered in bread, fish and wine – revelatory, Jesus appearing through closed doors – astounding, Saul blinded with a vision on the road to Damascus – transformative. I say incredible, but only idiomatically. That is to say the resurrection is not about believing it, but about seeing the wonder of life in a new light.

Auden’s two previous lines contain a kind of parallel invocation of new life:

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start

Philip Larkin devotes a whole poem to Days – albeit a very short one.

What are days for?  
Days are where we live.  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?  
  
Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields.

I think he’s saying we’re restricted to our days on earth – where can we live but days? – and the solution that actually solves that question is death, which brings both the doctor and the priest running to do their professional duties, certifying death and planning a funeral. What he doesn’t highlight is the fact that part of the priest’s role is to set life into a wider context that transcends days; to say that we can have meaning beyond the moment of birth and our last breath. It’s often difficult to accept, especially when we see so many lives cheaply and cruelly disposed of in wars and migration drownings and terrorist events. Christianity speaks of fulfilling the potential God has given us, but how do we do that without sufficient time?

I remember years ago now, when an undergraduate from St Hilda’s was murdered by her boyfriend, the then Principal saying at the funeral that life had meaning and purpose *however long or short it was*. It didn’t sound facile to me, but rang true. Just to have felt the miraculous sensation of living and to have been amazed and energised by it is a vision of something timeless. After that fresh excitement all lives experience compromise, setbacks, and few look back at their lives with a sense that they have been an unqualified success or that they wouldn’t have done many things differently. That is the prison of days. But if we can find a way to give praise to God we might find we are strangely freed.

I often wondered how people like Terry Waite survived imprisonment and solitary confinement, often in 24 hour darkness. How could Christian faith help in such soul-destroying circumstances? It was partly I think through the memory of prayers and hymns that could be recited over and over in the mind, expressing a connection with a body of people outside, the Church, who would be saying the same prayers and verses, or something similar. And both this fact and the sentiments of the better hymns engendered a sliver of hope, a still small voice, a link to a kind of cosmic freedom beyond the limit of days. And in a curious way, that is how I see the miraculous catch of fish and the mysterious, ambiguous identity of the risen Lord, and the question to Peter, which might resonate with each one of us, Simon, Son John, do you love me?