

## A New Creation

Sermon preached at Pusey House on the First Sunday of Easter 2014 by the Principal, the  
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*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week ... Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ... And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit*

Two weeks ago the Prime Minister kicked off a debate by describing the UK as a Christian country. This provoked a response from a group who considered the prime minister's description both dangerous and erroneous, and so the debate began.

The Great day of the Christian calendar is Easter Day: *"Now are all things filled with light; heaven, and earth, and the places under the earth. All creation doth celebrate the Resurrection of Christ."* If we attend to the message of Easter, the promise and hope of Easter, we come to the heart of the Christian message. What we discover is not just a set of beliefs, but an understanding of reality, a vision of God, humanity, and the world. The debate in the press about Christian influence is not, I would argue, about Christian influence. That should be so obvious that only the blind could deny it. It is more about whether or not that vision of things is attractive, beautiful, good. That's the real debate, or where people make mind up.

The New Testament accounts of the Resurrection of Christ from the grave are never only about the Res of Christ alone. These accounts make it clear that Res is nothing less that a recreation of humanity, and beginning of recreation and renewal of all created things. Orthodox Theologian Vladimir Lossky evokes the universal significance of resurrection of Christ:

*On the cross, death is swallowed up in life. In Christ, death enters into divinity and there exhausts itself, for "it does not find a place there." Redemption thus signifies a struggle of life against death, and the triumph of life. Christ's humanity constitutes the first fruits of a new creation. Through it a force for life is introduced into the cosmos to resurrect and transfigure it in the final destruction of death. ... Everything converges towards the ... complete restoration of all that is destroyed by death, towards the embracing of the whole cosmos by the glory of God Since the victory of Christ over death, the Resurrection has become universal law for creation; and not only for humanity, but also for the beasts, the plants and the stones, for the whole cosmos...<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [all faith in the triumph of life over death, every presentiment of the Resurrection, are implicit belief in Christ]

This is a grand statement setting out the significance of the Resurrection for the whole created order. Much of this I will need to leave hanging as an assertion, but imp at least to be clear what the Res means. However, let us focus on one aspect of this new creation, the renewal and recreation of humanity.

The Gospel for today follows on in St John's Gospel from the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the Divine Gardener in the Garden of the Resurrection which we considered last week in the beautiful fresco by Fra Angelico.

***On the evening of that day - Easter Day - the first day of the week ... Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ... And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"!***

This breathing on the disciples recalls the way the creation of humanity is described in the second chapter of Genesis... ***then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.***

However many ages or years God spent forming humanity, man remained an animal until the breath of God's life was breathed into him. The "living soul" is the gift of God the Holy Spirit. Genesis chapter 1 described the way that humankind is shaped by the divine inbreathing as being made in the image and likeness of God. When we see Christ performing this same action on Easter Day, we see again that Easter is nothing less than the recreation of humanity. A new creation, a new beginning. St Paul describes the implications of this when he writes that 'if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come.' [2 Cor 5.17]

The epistle also implies a connection between the old and new creation.

Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. For most of Christian history it was believed that these words were written by St John, the beloved Apostle, who in his Gospel fixes the attention of the reader on the water and blood flowing from the side of Christ:

***But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe.***

The commentators saw in this a prophecy of the new creation. Genesis 2 says that while the first Adam slept, his side was opened, and Eve, the mother of all the living, was formed from a rib taken from his side. So likewise, on Good Friday, the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the week, when in the beginning humanity male and female was created in God's image, the second Adam slept on the cross. according to God's providence, The second Adam's side was opened, and the New Eve, the Church, the mother of all who have life in Christ, is born from His side in the water and blood prophesying the sacramental life of Baptism and Holy Communion. This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.

Reflecting on the Gospel for today, the great Egyptian Theologian, Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) brings together these two accounts of creation to describe the meaning of the resurrection:

*As then, at the beginning, man was formed and came into being, so likewise is he renewed; and as he was then formed in the Image of his Creator, so likewise now, by participation in the Spirit, is he transformed into the Likeness of his Maker. [See again here – the gift of the Resurrection is a new creation, a new paradise] For that the Spirit impresses the Saviour's image on the hearts of those who receive Him surely does not admit of question.*<sup>2</sup>

What Christ gives to the Apostles or to the gathered disciples on the first Easter Day what He will give to the whole Church universally fifty days later. The first gift may be a kind of first instalment. His gifts are without measure, and if He gives only some measure of the Spirit, He is already giving some measure of Himself. Cyril of Alexandria strains to describe the greatness of this gift:

*[Christ] is formed in us through the Spirit, Who trans-elements us unto God by Himself. Since, then, we are conformed to Christ, and He Himself is Impressed upon us, and is accurately fashioned in us by the Holy Spirit, as being by Nature like unto Himself, then the Spirit is God, Who conformeth us unto God ... as bestowing a Participation of the Divine Nature...*<sup>3</sup>

While Cyril's language sounds strange, to be trans-elemented into God by the work of the Holy Spirit is not a bad way of describing our worship today, of describing the celebration of the Eucharist on the first day of the week, the weekly memorial of the first Easter Day.

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<sup>2</sup> Cyril, Commentary on John, vol 2, 675

<sup>3</sup> S Cyril, Dialogue 7 in Pusey, Sermon XVI, "The Christian's Life in Christ," *Parochial Sermons, Volume 1*, Third Edition, John Henry Parker, Oxford, 1852, 242 footnote. [Who conformeth us unto God, {not through ministerial Grace} but as bestowing a Participation of the Divine Nature {on those worthy of Himself.}]

By receiving the elements of bread and wine, made for us to be the body and blood of Christ, we confess that we too are trans-elemented into God, that we are partakers of His most precious body and blood. This is the work of the same Spirit which Christ breathed on His apostles. Our faith may be imperfect and confused, and yet by joining with the assembly of the disciples and seeking the risen Christ with faith, our humanity is enlivened and renewed. By drawing near with the first disciples in faith, by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and by participating in the Eucharist, the presence of the Risen Christ among the disciples is pictured for us in the Paschal candle which symbolizes His presence for us.

If we want to understand how the life of Risen Christ shapes the fabric of world before we even begin to think, or at least has had this role, we can note one more element of the account. All this takes place on the first day of the week. This is the first day of the new creation. In the Old Covenant the 7<sup>th</sup> day was the Sabbath Day, the day of rest. It was a rest which signified the perfection of the first creation and pointed to a correspondence of the world to God's will and purpose, however imperfectly. On this 7<sup>th</sup> day of the new creation, Christ lay in the tomb, having swallowed up death, and made a new peace between humanity and God. On the day of His perfect rest He completed His work and made possible of a new correspondence between God's purposes and human life.

The first day of the week when Christ appeared to His disciples is also the eighth day, a day beyond the limits of the old creation and the old order, and the first day of the new creation. This eighth day is the day 'without evening, a day without end, outside of time measured in weeks'.<sup>4</sup> Whenever we keep Sunday as the Lord's Day, we are participating in another way of keeping and experiencing time.

This is not the kind of time which can be cut into segments and organized, time like an empty container waiting for us to fill it or sometimes like a cage from which we cannot escape. Rather, on the Lord's day, when the Risen Christ appears in our midst, to renew us by His Spirit, the normal round is broken open, the eternal emerges in the temporal, and we let our lives be shaped by the Word and Wisdom of God in whom all things were created and who makes us partakers of the new life of the new age.<sup>5</sup> If we were to probe deeply into what it means to be or not to be a Christian society, we might consider how experience of time is shaped by Resurrection of Christ from the dead.

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<sup>4</sup> Basis the Great in Schmemmann, *On the Origins of Worship on Sunday, the Mystery of the eighth day*, chp 2 of *Intro to Liturgical Theology*, St Vlad's 1975, p. 62

<sup>5</sup> Schmemmann again, p 63, with Charles Taylor... living our lives in relation to Christ, the beginning and end, who orders, redeems, and sanctifies all our times

I will mention very briefly one more aspect of the account which perhaps grounds this hopeful account of the Resurrection. When Christ appears to the disciples He shows them his hands and his side. His body has been transformed, transfigured, yet the risen body of Christ bears the marks of suffering, the nails and the spear. What is true of the risen body of Christ will also be true of the members of his body. The Spirit which is breathed on us transforms us – in Christ we are a new creation. And yet, even as we are transformed, we still bear the marks of suffering in our bodies. In some cases, these marks will be scars of sin, our own, or of sin which we suffered, In other case, marks are signs of weakness

It is important to expect that even life made new will still bear these signs of weakness and suffering. By the Spirit which is breathed on us, these things may be transfigured to show Christ's power in our weakness, and yet they are still there. We can only know their meaning in the light which shines from and in the Risen Body of Christ.