

Trinity College, Cambridge 14 Nov 2010 - Remembrance Sunday
"Can we believe in Resurrection?"
Rom 6:3-10; John 5:19-24

Enveloped in the soothing aural tonescape of Fauré's *Requiem Mass* it is hard to imagine a more appropriate musical journey to accompany our prayers on this Remembrance Sunday - from the first sombre d minor chord to the gentle repose of the *In Paradisum* wrapped in the warmth of D major. Well, nothing more appropriate perhaps than the Duruflé Requiem, but let us settle for Fauré with gratitude - for Fauré does most wonderfully give shape to our mixed feelings on this day: there is room for sentiment, for nostalgia, for a tinted recalling of various pasts, but room too for acknowledging the harsh realities of war - and all drawn together in a resolution that breathes contentment and peace.

And that is just as well, for we are set another challenge this evening, one that also has direct relevance on this Remembrance Sunday, but a theme that does not so readily yield contentment and peace. Indeed, the New Testament tells us that the event of the Resurrection provoked doubt, fear and astonishment. St Mark intended his Gospel to end with the unsettling line, "They said nothing to anyone for they were terrified." Presumably, if they had persisted in saying nothing we should not be here today, but we are and so must persist with our enquiry: can we believe in Resurrection? Immediately we confront a new difficulty: the Resurrection of Jesus was not witnessed. It happened, as St Ignatius of Antioch has it, 'in the silence of God'. What is recorded is the consequences of God raising Jesus from the tomb: the appearances of the risen Christ and the birth of the community of believers, the Church. We are dealing, then, it would seem, with a unique event that was not itself witnessed, but which is attested by consequences, themselves diverse and remarkable. And these consequences make it plain that many have indeed believed in resurrection, for themselves and for others - because they have come to believe in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Our first reading from Paul's letter to the Romans teases this out and describes the level of commitment, the scale of transformation that he believes is demanded of all those who would share in the Resurrection of Jesus. "Do you not know," he says, "that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?" ... "If we have died with Christ we believe we will also live with him." Resurrection is not any kind of magic wand that effortlessly rights wrongs and replaces a world of sin with a world of peace. And yet, to take hold of the promise of resurrection, to live the new life of Christ, is immediately to see the world with new eyes. Charles Gore, the founder of our Community of the

Resurrection was once asked what it was all about. He replied, "We are just a group of clergymen learning to ride a bicycle." Typically, that apparently light-hearted, self-deprecating answer touches something much deeper. Most of us can remember learning to ride a bicycle. We can remember going out with little balancing wheels attached, or with the helping hand of a parent. We can also remember the astonishing liberation when we suddenly realised that we were actually doing it - we were riding along all by ourselves, unaided - but what we don't remember is the actual moment of transition. One moment we were learning, the next we were doing it: there must have been a moment in between, but we seemingly have no access to it.

This resonates powerfully with our experience of the Resurrection. Now we begin to understand the recorded emotions - the fear, the doubt, the amazement - for this is not how it was supposed to be, not how we had imagined it. When, in St Luke's account, the women find the empty tomb they are perplexed. Where is the body? And then, overwhelming fear. At the sudden appearance of two strange men, they were terrified. Then, when they have more or less got their heads around it all - enough to tell the disciples - those **men** responded in that effortlessly superior way: "Oh yes, and I suppose there was a troop of dancing camels and dogs dressed up as waiters going round with trays of drinks?" - 'for it seemed to them an idle tale'. Even Peter, who (without letting on to anyone else) decided he had better go and have a look for himself, goes home amazed. But amazed at what exactly? Luke says, "at what had happened" But he hasn't told us what happened to Jesus.

In fact, the more we think about it, the more Luke has told us. He has told us that encountering the risen Jesus is something that we share. (There may be Mary Magdalen moments, but you can't keep those to yourself or for yourself.) And he has told us that trying to pin down a resurrection moment is to miss the point. Once God raised Jesus from the dead, then resurrection is everywhere - before, after, in front, behind. There is no cut off point, no point at which things no longer matter. The resurrection gives utter seriousness to every action, word and thought of every human being at every time and in every place. At first glance this too is cause rather for anxiety than rejoicing: I don't care to think too long about all the bits and pieces of my past that are best forgotten. The idea that there is no way of finally losing them is not what I wanted to hear. And Luke has told us that the resurrection is not magic. It was an act of God that is too big for the world of space and time, but not magic ...

We are right to understand resurrection as the source of joy. But joy is not a word

that looms large in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Perplexity, terror, amazement, - these do - and, we might add, doubt, despair, depression, gloom, bear-with-sore-head syndrome - and all the other things that regularly describe our life. But this only serves to underline the huge leap from the first struggle to understand what had happened to the new life which bubbles out irrepressibly as a result of God's raising of Jesus from the dead. We are a fearful generation. We live in a state of anxiety - and the more we think about these things, the worse it all gets. We have our strategies for coping: the gin bottle, the parties, the pubbing and clubbing. But they only serve to put off the real business for later. What we are doing here in the celebration of this Eucharist is the truly real. Into this space, into this holy place, in gifts of bread and wine comes by God's willing and with our desiring, all the joy and the glory and the love and the immensity of God, the holy God, wholly present - a possibility brought about by resurrection. But the holy God comes wholly to us who are just as we were yesterday - self-absorbed, fearful, doubting, confused, mistaken, depressed. With infinite gentleness the holy God comes again and again, gently putting himself before us. And just as living faithfully with another human being in loving relationship makes us more like them, so living faithfully and patiently in this gift of the presence of the holy God, we become more like him. As the fourth evangelist records the words of Jesus, "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn 5:19). John, uniquely explores the loving obedience of the Son which both opens a way to understanding the cross and reveals its inseparability from the resurrection. The farewell discourse in John is then an extended invitation to commit ourselves to just such a relationship of loving obedience. "If we have died with Christ we believe that we will also live with him" (Rom 6:8) as Paul puts it. And suddenly we are at a place that speaks of hope and joy not just for ourselves, but for all those lost in the futility of war, whom we remember today. We can indeed believe in resurrection, but only by risking ourselves, like learning to ride a bicycle all over again, becoming imperceptibly more hopeful, more loving, more joyful, more ready for the resurrection to the life that will never end.

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