

In conversation with the Scriptures

Resurrection living

Rachel Nicholls explores Easter readings and themes, in conversation with Arnold Browne.

Introduction

The weeks of Easter to Pentecost and Trinity Sunday take us through a number of Gospel readings where Jesus is talking directly to his disciples. Some are the passages that we would expect, such as the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples and saying, 'Peace be with you.' Other passages are more surprising, such as a number taken from Jesus' farewell discourses in John's Gospel. Why, after Easter, are we returning to the words that Jesus spoke in the days and hours before his death? Perhaps his impending death is the key: here we have his last words, his crucial thoughts, his distilled wisdom for the disciples – whatever else you do, remember this. And we, like the first disciples, need to open ourselves to see what he might mean.

For resurrection is intimately connected with both life and death: without death, there can be no resurrection; but without an overflow of life with a capital 'L', there can also be no resurrection. What marks it off as different from the idea of the soul being eternal is the level of disruption involved: there is no resurrection without the direct intervention of God. We are called to 'die daily'; does this also mean that we are called out of death into new life each day? I wonder what this life really looks like. We rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us and transform us so that we can enter into this kind of Easter life.

Q What does it mean to live every day as someone who relies on God 'who raises the dead'?

Rachel

The painter David Hockney has an interesting take on the use of perspective in pictures. He says that the rules of traditional western perspective teach that parallel lines meet at a vanishing point on the horizon of the picture. But this viewpoint is only possible if you stand still in one position and record everything as moving away from you. Everything is ordered and consistent, but 'infinity' (God?) is on the horizon, never to be reached by the viewer. Hockney has now begun reversing perspective in his paintings, so that infinity begins at the position of the viewer (God with us?), and opens out to be everywhere, with items in the picture having multiple viewing points. The paintings are quite dizzy-making at first, but as he commented himself, the first time that he finished one it seemed to him that it had the immediate clarity of an Annunciation. This is a look of infinity coming to meet us. Maybe we need a reverse perspective on the resurrection, seeing it less as a single event fixed in the Gospel horizon and more as a sign and pattern that we can see in many places and from many different angles in our daily lives.

Arnold

In her memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* the novelist Jeanette Winterson says she believes in the power of stories 'because that way we speak in tongues'. 'Personal stories work for other people when they become both paradigms and parables'. John's Gospel gathers into one significant hour Jesus' crucifixion, his being lifted up in glory, and his drawing us into this disruptive pattern of dying to live. Accordingly, Winterson sees that as 'Thomas put his hand into the spear-wound in Jesus' side before he can accept that Jesus is who he says he is' so all her life she has worked creatively from the wound of her own abusive upbringing. A narrow and punitive misuse of the Bible was central to her childhood, and yet as she reads John now she finds that 'God is forgiveness' and that love is 'where everything starts, where we always return'. This is reliance on the God who raises the dead.

Q How does life in the Spirit connect with the resurrection of Jesus?

Rachel

Jesus' final words to his disciples in John's Gospel proceed in a series of circling descriptions about the close relationship that unites us with God. It becomes clear from these that life in the Spirit is not some add-on or powerpack to enable discipleship, but the way in which we are caught up into the relationship that Jesus has with his heavenly Father. The Spirit is the One who comes to be by our side to guide us and to remind us of all that Jesus has said and done, and to fill us with the kind of knowledge that is about knowing someone, rather than knowing something. John shows us the risen Jesus coming to his disciples and breathing on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' This bestowal of the Spirit is shown to be part of the same release of God's life and grace into the world that happens with the resurrection.

Arnold

In *De Profundis (Out of the Depths)*, written in Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde says that, devastated by losing everything on imprisonment, 'I determined to commit suicide'. Studying his Greek New Testament he found that Christ 'sought to become eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, and a cry in the lips of those whose tongues had been tied'. 'There is nothing in the world so wrong but that the spirit of humanity, which is the spirit of love, the spirit of the Christ who is not in churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart'. 'If I made a list of all that still remains to me, I don't know where I should stop: for, indeed, God made the world just as much for me as for any one else. Perhaps I may go out with something that I had not got before.'

Q What does community life look like when it is built on the foundation of the Easter events?

Rachel

The lectionary readings for the Easter season wisely take us to the Book of Acts and the first letter of Peter as well as to the Gospels. Understanding Easter does not rest solely on a meditation on the empty tomb, but extends out into seeing how people lived, acted and preached in the light of what they had come to believe. We see a mix of courage, gentleness and generosity combined with straight-speaking and the first attempts at articulating how the death and resurrection of Jesus could possibly be a revelation of God's plan for the world. All the time, there is an open invitation to join this community and many moments of new beginnings. The early churches refuse to look for any identity markers other than a willingness to live a life of love as Jesus did, overcoming evil with good.

Arnold

As we read together on Good Friday the story of Jesus' crucifixion, our small group in a prison's hospital wing realised that the youngest man there was quietly crying. We sat in silence, enabling him to tell us that he had been abused and raped as a child and planned to kill himself by his next birthday, even though that meant both offending God and upsetting his mother. Slowly and gently the oldest man there, from his wheelchair, guided him to 'the man on the cross' gazing on his mother. He spoke of other ways of dying that might be delightful to God and thoughtful of his mother. 'Live for others', he said, and help us to be here for one another in this place. 'I am here for you', he concluded, reaching out his hand. Within an institution full of fear and violence a community of the resurrection was being formed.

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