

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE20th April 2003 – Easter Sunday**Hope Beyond Reason****Where there's life there's hope...**

Where there's life, there's hope – so the saying goes. No matter how seemingly impossible the odds; no matter what apparently immovable obstacles are in the way, there can be hope for someone while they are still alive.

Take young Ali Ismail Abbas, for example. A boy with horrific injuries, not to mention a boy grieving the loss of his parents and others of his family. Yet from the moment his story hit the news bulletins here, we knew there was hope. He was alive – just. The Iraqi hospital could do precious little to alleviate his pain, let alone to treat his burns or help him cope after his amputations. But while he clings to life, there is hope. Sure enough, he is now being treated in one of the best specialist burns centres in the world, in neighbouring Kuwait, where the doctors are confident he will survive.

Or somewhat longer ago, and further away than any other human story, take the ill-fated flight of Apollo 13. Almost exactly 33 years ago, in April 1970, this moon mission was heading away from earth at 20,000 miles an hour, when disaster struck – one of the fuel tanks exploded, crippling the spacecraft and leaving the astronauts rocketing away from earth, with no possibility of a rescue mission.

But the three crew were alive, so there was hope. Mission control worked round the clock to devise a plan – cunning is not the word for it! - which would bring them safely home. Against all the odds, they succeeded, and they splashed down in the Pacific on April 17th.

... Or is there?

Yet often this is not enough; the mere fact of life is not a guarantee of hope. Iraqi soldiers who dared to drive their tanks out to face the Americans were alive, but they had no hope against the vastly superior technology and deadly accuracy of the American – and British – fire power. If they had gone to battle believing that they had a chance of returning victorious, they were deluded; life may have given them hope, but if so it was a futile hope.

Or take the case of Robert and Jennifer Stokes – the couple who travelled last month from Leighton Buzzard to Switzerland to commit suicide. Both were not only alive, but had every prospective of remaining so. They were not terminally ill like Dianne Pretty. Mr Stokes suffered from epilepsy and his wife had diabetes and back problems, but they could have enjoyed a reasonable quality of life together. Yet they evidently had given up hope.

So it doesn't follow that if there is life, there is really hope. Something more is needed.

Where there's death, there's no hope

But what does follow, without fear of contradiction or shadow of a doubt, is that where there is no life, there is no hope.

The parents of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman held out some small hope of getting their daughters back for two weeks after they disappeared; but once their bodies were found, all hope was gone.

When on 1st February this year the space shuttle Columbia broke up on re-entry, mission control did not burst into a frenzy of activity to devise a rescue plan for the crew. It was clear that they were dead, and thus clear that there was no hope.

So without life, there is no hope. That at least stands to reason.

No hope for the disciples

Thus it was that Jesus disciples and friends gave up all their hopes and dreams when Jesus died on the cross. Their seemingly invincible leader, who always had an answer for his critics which showed them up for the hypocrites they were; who demonstrated his complete control over his surroundings, whether the weather, the food, or the crowd with all their infirmities; this man so full of life and love that, having once met him, you would be forever lacking something if he left you; this... Messiah ... had been turned on by the crowd, humiliated by his enemies, suffered the most cruel death imaginable, and now lay dead in the tomb.

They were, quite literally, without hope. The death of someone close to you always casts a black shadow over life, such that things can seem hopeless for a while. Imagine then how much more hopeless life would seem following the shocking death of such a veritably god-like man.

He was, indeed, dead and gone. And gone too was any hope of revival in their nation, any hope that the Jews would re-discover that close relationship with their God which had, in previous generations, brought peace and prosperity to their land. The new age which Jesus himself had promised and which they had dared to think was about to dawn, would not now come about. The old order of things would remain, the Pharisees had won, and on top of all their grief they could now expect to be persecuted and even to face death for their erstwhile support of Jesus.

To hope for an easy life, let alone that God's Kingdom would still come, would be against all reason.

Disciples' difficulty believing the Resurrection

So when, against all reason and precedent, Jesus was raised from the dead his followers simply did not believe it! Had they harboured even the faintest glimmer of hope that Christ would be raised, then they may have seen the evidence for what it was; but as we read earlier, they had to be cajoled and persuaded to accept the truth for what it was.

Mary does not believe the evidence of her own eyes as she looks into the empty tomb – which remember had been guarded to prevent anyone from removing the body. She does not understand the testimony of the angels who tell her he is risen; and when she does see Jesus alive her brain refuses to accept that it is him, and she confuses him for the gardener – until Jesus gently reveals himself to her by speaking her name.

Likewise the disciples do not believe Mary's story, no doubt easily dismissing it as another garbled and unreliably bit of gossip from a wittering woman! When the two disciples who had left for Emmaus returned in great excitement to tell of how they too had met the risen Lord, the others could not overcome their natural hopelessness and allow themselves to believe. Even when Jesus appears in their very midst, not as a ghost but as a substantial being that they can touch, and even that eats with them, they still cannot believe!

Famously Thomas, of course, who missed this gathering, simply refused to accept the testimony of all the other disciples and friends. So sure was he of the facts – Jesus had died – that he was prepared to stand on his own for this truth even against all his friends, who somehow were deluded. Given that the other disciples had also refused to believe, it is somewhat unfair that history has denigrated Thomas as the doubter – for almost every single person doubted. For they had no hope. Jesus had died.

People still doubt today

It should be no surprise that thinking people today find it difficult to believe that Jesus rose from the dead – or at any rate to act consistently with that belief.

Interestingly, the number of people claiming to believe this is increasing. A UK poll in 2001, by the Fortean Times newspaper, found that a third of people agreed with the bodily resurrection of Christ. While the same poll a few weeks ago has 47 per cent believing it.

Encouraging perhaps, except that it is one thing to say you believe something, and quite another to let that supposed belief affect your life. Somewhat less than 5% of the population will have attended a church service today, and of course even that does not mean people *really* put belief into practice.

And no wonder. To believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead would be to have hope against all reason. It is against all the laws of nature, against all human experience. Unimaginable.

Could it be true?

Yet that does not mean it is *not* true. Just because everyone used to think the world was flat, did not mean that it was flat. Though of course this is an argument by false comparison – anyone with half a brain, an open mind, and a view of a ship appearing over the horizon could work out that the earth is round. It is only reasonable to deduce this.

While anyone with half a brain, an open mind, and any experience at all of people dying will know that Jesus Christ is dead. It is only reasonable to deduce this.

Unless, of course, you are God. Difficult though it is for us to admit it, God knows a thing or two more than us. He knew the world was round when we all thought it was flat. He knows what holds the fabric of space and time together, while we can only watch Horizon on telly and wonder what sort of drugs the crazy scientists are taking as they babble on about their latest discoveries in quantum mechanics, and their exciting new concepts in string theory.

God's reasoning is above ours. Indeed it is only by his grace and gift that we can reason anything at all. And to God, it is perfectly reasonable that his Son should rise from the dead.

In fact, he had planned this all along, from the very foundation of the earth.

Not only so, but he had told us about it too, only we were too dim-witted to realise. The Old Testament is littered such prophecies, which were there for the disciples – and anyone else – to read all along. Indeed, Jesus himself had dropped hints for some time about not only the death he was going to die, but that he would rise again. But no-one picked up on this at the time.

Why not? Surely not everyone could be so dull of understanding? Surely someone could reason it out?

Truth beyond human reasoning

The truth is, that even when you account for the fact that the disciples were so close to the events – and to the man – that their emotions would cloud their reasoning, you have to conclude that it was beyond *human* reasoning to work this out. Just like it is today.

So let's look at the moments when people finally accept that Jesus was raised.

For the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in a passage we didn't have time to read earlier in Luke 24:

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going Jesus acted as if he were going further. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight.

It was when *their eyes were opened* – that is, when Jesus himself opened their eyes, that they could see who he really was and believe that he was alive again.

For the disciples in the locked room, we read again from Luke's account:

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Similarly, it is when Jesus himself opens their minds that they could understand scripture, and as they did so what had previously been a great contradiction suddenly made sense. Until then they were in a real turmoil of emotion as their rational minds battled with their desperate hearts to know whether to believe or not. Their eyes could see Jesus very real and very alive in front of them, and their hearts wanted to believe; but their minds knew that he had died; and knew that they were in a locked room where even living people could not suddenly appear without knocking at the door first. But now they could understand, and believe.

Missing the plot

This inability to understand what is really going on is in fact quite common in the Gospels. Amazing though it may seem, there were people who had spent their whole lives studying the scriptures of the old testament, learning from yet others who had likewise spent their lives in this; yet not one of them had understood the basic plot!

With this in mind, are we really surprised to learn that a third of Church of England clergy doubt or disbelieve in the physical Resurrection? That makes the CofE leadership less orthodox than the rest of the country! How can so many intelligent people completely miss the plot?

This is not limited to the clergy; it is also true of the man in the street. Previous generations of school children would learn verses, chapters or whole books of the Bible by rote, but would completely fail to grasp its meaning! This is not because the language was 400 years out of date, though for some that can be a problem. It is because knowing the truth is more than remembering a few words.

The Reason for the Resurrection

To really know that Christ is risen from the dead, we have to know why he died in the first place – and this is quite unpalatable. He died for us. We ought to be crucified, not Christ! It's not that we are cruel and violent beyond the bounds of common human decency, but because God's standards are so high, the purity he demands of us so complete, that not one of us can measure up to it – common human decency, as it were, is wickedness to God. Few are prepared to look into their hearts to find such deadly impurity; and so few are willing to accept that Christ died for them.

But there is hope! Just as Christ himself was able to open the minds of the disciples to the real plot of the Old Testament, and hence to what his own death and resurrection was about, so too – because he is alive today – can he open our minds to the truth. And what a hope that gives us! If Christ was raised from the dead, then we too can know assurance of life after death, of a destiny to be with Him in glorious and perfect peace for ever.

It was that hope – and of course the reality that was behind it - which transformed those fearful disciples into a bold and courageous band which would take this Good News and spread it far and wide throughout their world, without fear of the consequences for themselves.

Indeed, despite all they were to suffer, they had what most people today lack: that inner peace which enabled them to cope with life. But they were not inward looking – they also had a true, deep and sacrificial love for others. Both of these stemmed from the same source – from knowing God himself and *His* love for them; knowing that their sins had been forgiven and their future secure; and of course being indwelt by the power of the Risen Lord through his Holy Spirit.

Many of us here today have found that same hope. It may seem against all reason to you. But it is not *against* reason; it goes *beyond* our reason, to the higher reason that is God himself. There is no greater One to place your faith in than the Creator of all that exists and the Redeemer of all who call on him. I hope you have the reason to do just that.