



Romans 8.1-11
Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23
12th July 2020

The Spirit of Resurrection

Minister: Let the words of my mouth
All: And the meditations of all our hearts
Minister: Be acceptable in your sight
All: O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen

We talk of St Paul's conversion as a one-off experience – but I'm not so sure.

He'd set off from his religious HQ something of a zealot believing so completely in his own brand of truth that every step he took to quell the opposition was firm footed.

Yet, on that Road to Damascus something, or maybe someone, disturbed that self-assured certainty. He looked back on it as an epiphany moment and described it in terms of a life changing vision. As if he'd met with the very one, he so despised – Jesus.

Up at Damascus they must have shivered at the mention of his name and dreaded his arrival. Saul, as he was then known, was probably the biggest threat to the emerging Church. His mission in Damascus was nothing less than the total obliteration of these Christians.

How utterly unexpected then, that he arrives at the city gates proclaiming a total change of heart.

Damascus was the Milton Keynes of its day in that it was built on a grid system with its longest road, stretching one and a half kilometres across the city being given the rather unimaginative name of Straight Street. That's where Paul lodged upon his arrival, seemingly blinded by his visionary encounter with Jesus and that's

where he was met by Ananias, one of the Christian disciples of the city.

What happens next must surely be one of the bravest and loveliest moments of our scriptures.

Prompted by the Holy Spirit Ananias, perhaps against his better judgment, goes to meet Saul; the very man his community was so dreading. As he does so he embraces and greets him with these words of welcome: *Brother Saul*.

Ananias is, I believe, a rather modest, unsung hero in the New Testament. We are then told Saul stayed some time with the Christian community in Damascus.

In Romans 8, Saul, known to us better now as Paul, writes about leaving an old way of life and taking up a new way of thinking; of casting off an old life that made little room for Jesus and making a new life with Jesus at the centre.

Paul uses a sort of shorthand term for all this. He says it's about living a life 'in Christ'.

Where did he learn that? How did he know what it looked like?

I think he learnt it first in Damascus and he knew what it looked like when he met Ananias. Paul's conversion wasn't just on the road to Damascus, it continued in Damascus over all those days he spent with the Christian community there. He discovered what God's love could look like in the face of another. He learnt what it was to live 'in Christ'. Paul writes Romans 8 not as a theorist but as a practitioner.

Live by the Spirit, he says for *Christ is in you*.

I think he learnt that through his mentor Ananias and amongst those welcoming friends of Jesus with whom he now so identified, the church at Damascus.

Our Gospel reading this morning talked of a seed taking root and producing a harvest. Later Paul would write of the Fruit of the Spirit, the harvest of qualities such as love, joy and peace. He saw, I believe, such a harvest in the lives of those who welcomed him as Brother Saul to Damascus – a fellow companion on the Way of Faith.

As Paul lets his thoughts develop in Romans 8, he goes on to talk of God's presence as: *The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead.*

I always love being reminded that the Church is essentially a Community of The Resurrection and that we are, at any season of the year, an Easter Morning People.

So here in today's passage St Paul doesn't just refer to the Spirit of Life, or the Spirit of Love or even the Spirit of God, but *the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.*

Paul knew a thing or two about death. It had, in a way, dominated his life for a while. I suspect he grew to deeply regret holding the coats of those who stoned the first Christian martyr Stephen and I wonder what he did with those official papers giving him permission to root out and kill the Christians of Damascus.

Not so very long ago the writer of Romans believed the life of Jesus of Nazareth had been snuffed out on the cross. And then, in that life changing vision he had, it was as if he met with the resurrected Jesus.

No wonder, then, that those Easter concepts of new life and fresh beginnings are so dear to him, That he spent the rest of his life preaching that living with the risen life of Jesus at the centre of everything we are and do was fundamental to who we are as followers of the One who was both crucified and risen.

There is, I think, such depth in that phrase of his: *the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead.*

It acknowledges an implied reality that death, and moments of dying, times of despair and days of confusion come to all of us as part of the journey of life. Yet, they are not necessarily the end point. There can be light, peace and a deeper understanding that brings hope.

Last Sunday, in an excellent Morning Service on BBC Radio 4, Lucy Winkett, the Rector of St James', Piccadilly, teamed up with the composer Bob Chilcott and reflected on the way music speaks to us in these troubled times. At one point in the service they explored how dissonance, the times when music seems to be squeezed, almost held in a state of suspension, by clashing chords, brings to a song or a symphony a sense of colour and contrast. Those dissonant phrases seem to push the music forward, we have them but just for a moment, and then there is resolution. It's like we have held our breath for a second or two and then, as the piece finishes resolved, we breathe again.

It was a cleric and composer's way of seeking to understand and come to terms with the Pandemic. We are still in that moment when life for our world is far from resolved, we are living with dissonance. As is anyone who has experienced grief, loss, separation or anxiety.

These are Good Friday moments. Times of suffering and lament. Shared with us by God.

Paul, I think knew such dissonant episodes in his life too.

Yet, here in Romans 8, he hints at resolution even as he speaks of *the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead*.

I suspect the Queen's TV broadcast from Windsor Castle, as she invoked the phrase *We will meet again* will go down as one of the most important of her long reign. Yet, I valued even more her audio message on April 12th this spring when she spoke of Easter, and that it had not been cancelled this year, for, in her words: *we need it more than ever*.

I think Paul is saying to us: whatever Good Friday you are going

through may God's Spirit of Resurrection, the Spirit of the Empty Tomb, the Spirit of Jesus rest upon you and grant you peace and hope.

Back in 2015, at yet another time of tragedy for the African American community, this time in Charleston as nine members of a Methodist congregation, including their pastor, The Revd Clementa Pickney, were gunned down in worship by a white supremacist, President Obama went to the town for their memorial service.

He spoke of a Reservoir of Goodness that can flow into any and every life, even in the most challenging of situations. And then he did something which caught the eye of the press and was shown on TV stations all-round the globe. He paused in his speech and sang the first verse of Amazing Grace. By the second line the entire auditorium was on its feet, joining their President in a song about grace, hope and transformation.

John Newton was the author of that hymn. A slave ship captain who left that way of life when he became a Christian. He served here in Buckinghamshire at Olney and then opposite the Bank of England at St Mary's Woolnorth – a church a group of us visited on a previous Christian Aid Circle the City Sunday.

John Newton knew the reality of Romans 8. He knew of the *old nature* that Paul spoke of. He thought of that wretched time of his life and he was so ashamed. He called himself *The Old Blasphemer* and no blasphemy was greater to him than the Slave Trade. He became an abolitionist alongside Wilberforce and others in the so-called Clapham Sect.

As he left that old life, he embraced a new way of being, with Jesus at the centre. A life transformed by *the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead*.

That's what Romans 8 is all about – the amazing grace of God that enables us to live with integrity, to strive for justice and to sing our way through those unresolved chords with hope.

May it be so, in our time and our experience in the name of God who sings alongside us. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 7th July 2020