

AN EASTER PEOPLE

As I get older even the simplest things appear more mysterious than I once thought. The more attention I give to things, the more mysterious they seem. What could be simpler than the words “I love you”? yet more mysterious than the transfigured eyes of two people in love? What is more mundane than home-making, or more rewarding than the exploration of another’s mystery over a lifetime of marriage? Similarly, what could be more accessible than a baby in a manger, or a man speaking of justice and God’s forgiveness; or the breaking of bread in a shared meal? What is easier to describe than a cruel and undeserved death, or an empty grave? And yet once we begin to look beneath the surface, we find it harder and harder to describe in language the significance of these things. They are so much more mysterious than they appear. No words can adequately explain the meaning of the Cross, the Easter appearances of the risen Christ, the work of the Spirit, the nature of the Eucharist, or the new life of the Kingdom. Yet here am I, along with thousands of others today, struggling to convey the glory of a world new-made at Easter and potentially transfigured by the grace and goodness of God. What appears, at one level, to be so simple and straightforward, is revealed at another as profoundly mysterious.

Some Christians look for greater certainty by reducing the mystery and resorting to a safe form of fundamentalism. “Give me a simple faith”, they say, “just the facts in black and white”. Yet for most of us, life just isn’t like that, and faith just isn’t that simple, not if we’re seeking to live by truths which will satisfy both mind and heart, and will not be regarded as foolishly naïve by intelligent agnostics and atheists. Faith always lies somewhere between doubt and certainty, and needs to address that ultimate and most mysterious reality of all – death., the one certainty we all share.

On this Easter Day, we come together as members of a community who describe ourselves as an “Easter People”, and claim that we live in the light of the Resurrection. What does it mean, in practice, to put our trust this mystery? For me it’s a matter of believing that God is not a God of the dead but of the living, and trusting that my relationship with the loving, compassionate, forgiving God that Jesus reveals, is one that may be changed by my death, but will not be ended by it. It means

trusting that God in his creative power will refashion me, recreating in me everything that has made me my unique self.

How can we believe this? Well, for starters, there's the evidence of our persistent hunger for a truth and beauty that we occasionally glimpse in this life, yet frustratingly always seems to elude our grasp. And then there's the compelling need we all seem to share, to find meaning and purpose in our lives. St Paul refers to this when he writes about how we "see through a glass, darkly", and T.S.Eliot talks of the "hints and guesses" by which we pilot our way through our human journey. It's these hints and guesses that we come to church to explore and celebrate. For the hints contained in the story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have been sufficient to change the direction of the civilized world. And the guesses start with the belief that this man was indeed the unique, though not exhaustive, revelation of God, and have gone on to be persuasively tested in generation after generation of changed lives. St Augustine summed it up: "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you." The only truth that makes sense of our search for love and our yearning for what is good and true, is that we are made for life with God and are dissatisfied and incomplete until we find our resting-place in him. He is our homeland, both the source of our longings and their ultimate fulfilment.

When we say we hope for heaven, we are setting our longing in the context of a new quality of life which St John calls 'eternal' - eternal life measured, not in terms of days or years, but in terms of a deepening love and trust, a relationship with God that once entered into is binding and unbreakable and which death cannot sever. Our relationship with God is forged in this life, and is nurtured by our attempts to grow in his grace through prayer, worship and service; but though it is a relationship that has already begun, it continues unbroken through and beyond our death into eternity.

At one level it's all so simple! A baby in a manger; a man demonstrating in his life the meaning of self-giving love; this same man hanging on a cross; a garden, an empty grave, and one mistaken for a gardener; an invitation to a breakfast, the question to Peter that contains both his forgiveness and his task. "Do you love me? Then follow me" How simple! A child can understand these stories. And yet,

because these stories claim to reveal the once-and-for-all-time true nature of God and our relationship with him, how profoundly mysterious! We can indeed only understand “in part”. And yet without the Easter experience – however it is interpreted – we wouldn’t be here. If nothing followed the crucifixion but the sealing of the tomb, there would be no gospel, no commission to Peter, and no church.

The God we believe in has the power to create and re-create. In the resurrection of Jesus we glimpse the possibility of a new way of living - life with God, not only here and now, but eternally, beyond the threshold of death. In Jesus’ life and death and resurrection our own life and death are redefined. So we stand, an Easter people with one foot in time and one foot in eternity. In the risen Christ we catch the scent of who God truly is and what we are created to be. How simple, and yet how wonderfully mysterious is that!

Here as a kind of summary is a sonnet by the priest-poet Malcolm Guite:

“Wherever someone knows that they are lost,
And cries for help to find his way back home,
And turns towards their father’s house at last,
You are their Way before they know your name.
Wherever someone searches for the truth
And tests each easy answer in its turn,
Stressing the question, pressing to the pith,
You are the truth they cannot yet discern.
Wherever someone sorrows over death
Yet seems to glimpse the gate beyond the grave,
The living spirit in the dying breath,
You are the Life within the life they love.
You come to us before we ask or pray
Till you become our Life, our Truth, our Way.”