

5. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried, on the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures.

The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection stands at the centre of the good news that the first Apostles and the Church proclaimed to the world, their KERYGMA! God's saving plan was accomplished once and for all by the redemptive death of his son, Jesus Christ.

The Church remains faithful to this belief, saying that this was 'according to the scriptures', as Jesus himself explained both before and after his death. It is obvious from the beginning of his public ministry that some of the Pharisees, along with a number of priests and scribes set out to be rid of Jesus, however Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance, an unfortunate series of coincidence, rather it was part of God's plan, as St Peter explains in his first sermon to the Jews in Jerusalem given at Pentecost – 'This Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God', he says (*Acts 2:23*). At the same time we must also remember that the Pharisees, Pontius Pilate and all the rest are not just passive players as the drama unfolds, they all have free will and all play their part in the divine plan foretold in the scriptures; the death of the one Isaiah describes as the 'suffering servant', whose death will be a ransom that will free humankind from the slavery of sin. And so it is that 'While we were yet sinners,' writes St. Paul, 'Christ died for us'. (*Romans 5:8*)

And we really believe it was 'for our sake', not just some of us but all of us – the Church believes and teaches that Christ dies for all of us, without exception. The suffering servant who makes himself into an 'offering for sin'... 'Bearing the sins of many' to the cross, to the cross offering himself as a sacrifice in reparation, atonement and satisfaction for all our sins. It takes the divine person of the Son to do this, a unique act that becomes the source of eternal salvation.

Our creed tells us he not only died for us, he 'was buried', for not only was it God's plan that his Son should die for our sins, he was also 'to taste death' that separation of the soul from the body, the time between his death on the cross and the time he is raised from the dead. The Church celebrates this in the mystery of Holy Saturday, the lying in the tomb symbolising God's great Sabbath rest when man's salvation is complete! It's complicated however – Christ's death is very real in that it puts an end to his earthly existence, but because he is still the divine person of the Son, his was not a corpse like any other, rather his divinity preserves his body from corruption. Yes scripture says, 'cut off from the land of the living', yet 'you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your holy one see corruption'. The Jews believed bodily corruption didn't begin until the fourth day; Jesus' resurrection is 'on the third day'.

The frequent affirmation that Jesus was 'raised from the dead' presupposes that he was in the realm of the dead before his resurrection – the Apostles Creed clearly states 'he descended into hell'. He descended there, not as sinner, but as Saviour – he harrows Hell, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there – those like the poor man Lazarus, who lies in the bosom of Abraham, and frees the just who have gone before him. This is the last phase of his messianic mission, those 'who hear the voice of the Son of God will live', his death destroys the power of death, that is the devil, he is not overcome by the final enemy. No Jesus says to Lazarus and all the others, 'I did not create you to be a prisoner in Hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead' (ancient homily for Holy Saturday). And so having traversed the world of the dead, on the third day Jesus rose again. The resurrection of Jesus is the crowning truth of our faith, believed in and lived as the fundamental truth of our Christian existence. And yet I am sure we all have our doubts at times. For some the evidence might seem a bit flimsy, it doesn't mount to much does it when you are talking to a husband and his young children about the death of a wife and mother and yet... as St. Paul writes to the Church at Corinth, 'If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' – and that really is the point!

Why then is the resurrection so important to Christian believing? Well the resurrection is the confirmation of all our Lord's works and teachings – it gives definite proof of him being who he says he is! The fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament 'in accordance with the scriptures' and our Lord's own words 'When you have lifted up the son of man, then you will know that I am he!' While Christ's death liberates us from the bonds of sin, his resurrection opens up the way to a new life for all of us, man restored! Yes now freed from sin and death, we can share the new life he revealed by his own resurrection from the dead. 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' Of course other religions, including the Jews, have had their own ideas about resurrection, the raising of the dead at the end of time, but the New Testament gives the idea a whole new meaning, with life restored and glorified through and by physical death; this is not immortality however, for the earthly man must die in order to receive life. Christ's death, says Prof. Quick is 'the gateway to that life', by his death 'the universal fact of physical decay and death' becomes for man 'the sacrament' of the inward and spiritual truth that life must be wholly surrendered before it can be wholly won. A story he says 'of exaltation won through humiliation, of gain through loss, of having through giving, of power through suffering, of victory through defeat, of joy through sorrow, of holiness through common sharing, of glory through shame, of life through death.' This is the gospel truth, that the

Son of Man, who is also Son of God, must suffer in order to reign and save, in his own person he proved this truth to be true!

Benedict (pope emeritus) in his own book on the creed, 'I believe', speaks of Jesus' death on the cross as a mystery that eludes reason, something which, humanly speaking, appears quite senseless. On its own the cross, he says, does not explain the Christian faith, indeed it just looks like a tragedy, something absurd. It is the fact that the 'crucified man' was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures that the paschal mystery at the heart of our faith, is completed. The corner stone of what the first Christians and the early Church believed about Jesus, the key to Pauline Christology, begins and ends with the resurrection, it is the basis of their Kerygma, their proclamation of Faith. Paul wasn't making up what he writes in his letters, just following some fairy tale – it is the tradition he has received from those who were actually there on the day and the days following, 'I preach what they preach', he says, I got it from the horse's mouth, from the first apostles, his kerygma, the kerygma of the early church, is their kerygma.

Benedict reminds us too that the Church today, in her believing and preaching isn't creating anything new either, we preach the faith that has been handed down to us all these generations later, a faith founded on the truth about Christ and his cross and resurrection, a truth we repeat Sunday by Sunday when we recite the creed and indeed every time we celebrate the mass, the paschal mystery revealed on the altar. 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again!

Of course there are doubts and as I said earlier the evidence could seem very weak, especially to non-believers, there have always been doubters, from Thomas to the present day! St. Paul was well aware of this, yet in his writings he takes the resurrection as fact; otherwise Christianity is basically a waste of time! The tomb was empty and Jesus appeared, fact, facts closely bound to the testimony of those who were there. But so what some may say, what's it to us 2000 years later? Does it matter that the resurrection happened? Well for believers it matters in that it confirms for us who we believe Jesus to be, our saviour and our God.

Yes it's difficult to keep the faith in the kind of world in which we now live. Oh for a faith like St. Paul's, after all who among us has not had those little nagging doubts? And while we are on the subject could you for example, explain about the resurrection to a neighbour? It's not easy is it and as Benedict reminds us believing in Jesus Christ, and living the truth, implies sacrifice and implies suffering, 'for' he says Christianity is 'not the easy road, it is rather, a difficult climb'. However, it's worth it, for as he concludes 'It is the road by which we come to know life in its profundity, in its beauty, in the great hope born from Christ crucified and risen again. The believer, says Benedict finds himself between two poles, on the one hand the Resurrection which in a certain sense is already present and operating in us, and on the other, the urgency to enter into the process which leads everyone and everything towards that fullness described by Paul in Romans 8 in those words that sum up the longings of all people of faith, people like us; 'as the whole of creation groans and suffers almost as with the pangs of childbirth, so we groan in the expectation of the redemption of our bodies, of our redemption and resurrection.' And what bliss that will be say I !!

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