

Winchester Cathedral 2nd May 2010 Readings 2 Samuel 7.4-13. Acts 2.14a, 22-32.
Evensong The Revd. Paul A Newman

98 yrs ago, just before the onset of the catastrophic 1st World War, in his preface to “Androcles & the Lion :A prospect for Christianity” the Irish dramatist and Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw, made a memorably ironic and not entirely irreverent comment:

“We have always had a curious feeling that though we crucified Christ on a stick, he somehow managed to get hold of the right end of it, and that if we were better men (sic) we might try his plan.”

Today is the 5th Sunday in the Easter season. Easter recently likened by Canon Roly Riem to “a stick of dynamite”, opens out to all and each of us, a living mystery in the place of a dead certainty (“crucified, dead and buried”)

At all times and in all places since the first Easter, our abiding Christian task is...forgive the metaphor .. “to grasp the right end” of that particular stick of spiritual dynamite in relation to changing circumstances and contexts.

The link between this evening’s earlier readings from the OT Book of Samuel and the NT Acts of the Apostles is a powerful political mythology around King David of ancient days. You may recall his story.....the shepherd boy, least of Jesse’s sons, sling and pebble slayer of the Philistine giant, Goliath; Court musician to King Saul, with a curious friendship with the king’s son, Absalom. Anointed King by the prophet Samuel, in succession to Saul, seducer of Bathsheba whom he married having arranged the death of her husband; the powerful mythology centred on his heroic status as founder of Jerusalem, the focus of national and religious unity. “Thus says the Lord of hosts, (to my servant David) I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel.....that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly.....” (2 Samuel 7.8f)

Centuries.....almost a millennia later, by the time of Our Lord, Shepherd/King David was a Messianic figure associated with the dreams and promises of restoration, of recovery of a lost past, amidst a present of corrupt and compromised Herodian and High Priestly semi-rulers under the tutelage of pagan imperial Rome.

That Messianic hope was both a potential snare for Jesus, and actual delusion for some others. At times we read in the Gospels, Jesus withdrew “because the crowd wanted to make him king”.

Irony and paradox surround his momentous entry into Jerusalem ahead of the Passover festival, which we commemorate on Palm Sunday; later at his trial before the Roman governor (Are you the King of the Jews? asked Pontius Pilate.....”My kingdom is not of this world.” replied Jesus, meaning that his authority and purpose stems not from within the scheme of worldly systems of domination, power-seeking and rivalry); and finally on a cross of execution, his coronation with a crown of thorns, and the superscription “The king of the Jews”.

Even after his resurrection, in Acts Chapter 1 vs,6 we read: ‘So when they (the disciples) had come together they asked him,’ “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Verily, the wrong end of the stick!

The 27 volume library of the New Testament came to be written entirely from the baseline of Jesus’ Resurrection. Without that they would never have come into existence. That is crucially the case with the 4 Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are composed from the perspective of the Resurrection but Mark and Luke in particular, capture over and again the bafflement, misunderstanding and non-understanding of Jesus’ closest companions and followers.

Only in the light of the encounters with Jesus Crucified and Raised, did inner personal and then collective processes of insight, understanding and re-visioning take effect.

As we might say, “things started to fall into place” in a radically new way. Shared memories of a recent past, its hopes and joys mingled with astonishment and bafflement, had culminated in terrifying collapse, disaster and disillusionment and their collusion in the seeming defeat through Jesus’ self-surrender to the powers-that-be.

Easter, I began by reminding us, replaces a ‘dead certainty’ with a ‘living mystery’. That living mystery is not unfathomable and is about much more than ‘the nuts and bolts’ so to speak, of the once dead, now alive Jesus. There are unfathomable heights about what that entails for us at the end of our lives, but to reverse St Paul’s dictum, “if only in the **next** life our hope is

in Christ” then to a large extent we have gotten hold of ‘the wrong end of the stick’ or perhaps only half of it!

There are also fathomable depths in all this “*for us and our salvation*” as for the first disciples and apostles. For them it involved the transforming of understanding, a recasting of their mindsets through grasping that which animated the attitudes, actions and teachings of Jesus.

That mindset has been summed up as “the intelligence of the victim”; a ‘sense and sensibility’, (as Miss Jane Austen might have put it) which Jesus had all along, but which the disciples didn’t grasp and realise until after his resurrection. It was so counter-cultural, so counter-intuitive....and so it is still.

After a 20th Century which witnessed two world wars waged on an unprecedented scale with technologies of death and destruction, and an epoch of diabolical genocide and holocaust; the mindset of Jesus, the Word of God in our human flesh, blood and bone, faithfully traced out in the pages of the Gospels has startling significance.

The first decade of this 21st century was designated by the World Council of Churches as a “Decade against Violence”. A ‘sense and sensibility’ towards violence in so-called Holy Scriptures (sometimes deservedly termed ‘texts of terror’) and of warlike metaphor in hymns and services was urged on all the churches in order to forestall hints of uncritically endorsed violence.

This is part of the fathomable depths *for us and in us* of Jesus’ Resurrection. How so?

Before we become “heirs by **grace** of his eternal kingdom” through our baptismal life in the Spirit, we are first of all heirs by nature and varyingly by nurture, of tendencies towards **disgrace**.

Human survival instincts of rivalry, competitiveness and domination, our tendencies towards projections onto others of aspects of unacknowledged or denied aspects of ourselves to the extent of exclusion and shunning are part of what the Church came to term ‘Original Sin’, our common natural fallenness.’

But it is something of that new “sense and sensibility” which began to take shape in the infant church, the early ‘communities of the resurrection’, as it had in the immediate companions of Jesus.

The Resurrection of Our Lord gave the first disciples new understanding about Jesus himself; about the character of God; and about the nature of human beings.

In the end the judge of the world is the crucified and risen victim.

“My kingship is not of this world” replied Jesus to the Roman Governor.
Why not?

Because the Kingdom of God builds from the excluded victim in the way in which God has self-revealed to us in Jesus.

Moreover, God also reaches out in Jesus Christ to embrace in offer of forgiveness the guilty oppressor and perpetrator.

Often in our lives we like others may have been in varying contexts or degree something of both; victim and perpetrator.

“Father, forgive” we know not what we do.

The Kingdom of God turns worldly-human standards of judgement upside down; the last are first, and the first are last. He “puts down the mighty from their seat and exalts the humble and meek. He fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away”.

So ponder ‘the living mystery’: but may we also live from it!

“The kingdom of God is (*entos*) inside/ among you”. (Luke 17.21-22) but may we not simply store it there!

Amen.

Gracious God, who created us, male and female in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it the seeking of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your Name.

Gracious Father, source of truth and understanding, who knows and loves the whole creation; watch over our nation at election time; that truth may prevail over distortion, wisdom prevail over recklessness and the needs of every person be heeded.

Lord Jesus, who chose the way of the Cross in the garden of Gethsemane, help us to turn away from self-interest and to support policies that sustain the poor, the vulnerable and the frightened peoples of this world.

Holy Spirit, who brought understanding among myriads of peoples and languages at Pentecost, give to all your people a passion of justice and

peace, and inspire us all to seek for unity and co-operation throughout the world and in our political life together. Amen.