Easter Day 200414

Spring flowers, wonderful music, celebration of new life in baptism …

Easter is the focal point. Sin, suffering and death are overwhelmed by God’s triumphant resurrection life. God breaks through into the dreary cycles of fear and loss. St Paul says, ‘If Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain’

So it’s a test of our faith and our belief. And if it’s a test, it’s quite a challenge. In horse racing terms, this is Beechers Brook. This is the White Queen telling Alice that she can believe six impossible things before breakfast. People think about faith and believing – maybe wish they understood more – maybe wish they believed more. And in the church, times are changing. Membership and belonging are often declining. But people are more ready to face the challenge of believing and following – it’s a move in our church from membership to discipleship.

So what does the Gospel reading tell us about how those who found the empty tomb reacted and what they believed.

Firstly – and I think very importantly – the news of the empty tomb and the possibility of resurrection were spoken softly – no bible thumping and shouting evangelists. The news is whispered rather than shouted – shared in growing faith but not in easy certainty. It was the most extraordinary thing they believed had ever happened, and yet they tell it so quietly that you have to lean close to be sure what they are telling. They tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious, and holy, and fragile, and unbelievable, and true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonour it."

And then we find that different people believed it in different ways. People who knew Jesus well – like Mary - didn’t recognise him at all until Jesus uses her name. Peter went into the tomb, saw the burial clothes – but did not yet believe. The beloved disciple races Peter to the tomb. He goes in. The Gospel says that he ‘saw and believed’ And so it goes on – Thomas demands proof – to see the marks on Jesus hands and in his side. Two disciples walk with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and don’t know him – until he breaks the bread.

Those who witnessed the resurrection believed it in their hearts – and believed it when they met with Jesus. It’s a truth lived and tested in living.

Many of us have absorbed the idea that faith is primarily a matter of intellectual conviction – that it’s a left brain thing. And I certainly don’t believe in turning my mind off and making a Beechers Brook leap of faith. For our Anglican/Episcopal way of faith holds together the authority of scripture with the tradition of the church and with reason. We don’t, can’t and shouldn’t believe what is irrational.

So faith involves mind. But probably more heart than mind. And relationship is in there too. And it’s a life journey in which our life experience is melded into a way of meaning.

What I mean is that we come to faith – we acquire faith – by living faith. If you live life intensely – if you try to live life with integrity – if you try to live life in a positive way … you have to decide how to address the challenges and the difficulties. Many feel despair – or they feel angry as is normal – or they feel self-pity. If we try to live with faith – and to live with resurrection faith – the effect is transformative. The problems don’t vanish. What is going wrong doesn’t suddenly just come right. But the sadness, the pain, the anger and the despair which speak of death are somehow overwhelmed by strength and hope.

And when we look out on the world in all its pain – the grieving parents of South Korea, the people of Syria and Ukraine; the challenges facing our own society about poverty and welfare; the shameful juxtaposition of our wealth and our foodbanks; the search for high standards in public life and in financial administration ..

There too we are looking at situations which speak of death and hopelessness – and which cry out for new life, possibility and hope.