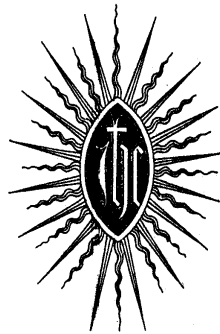


THE TRADITIONAL ANGLICAN CHURCH

PROVISIONAL PARISH OF ST. LUKE, AMPHILL

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Easter 23-03-08

“ye are dead” (Epistle).

Easter is always a time when pundits produce more heat than light. A few clarifications will help. Judaism almost never entertained any idea of the “immortality of the soul” (that a human being is defined by “soul” and the body does not matter) and nothing in the New Testament suggests this assumption. Humanity was essentially bodily and death was an end. If anything persisted in the grave, it was like an echo – a trace of where life had once been. Yet some (we cannot now tell how many) Jews had understood that if God could heal the sick, then he could raise the dead. God's promises to his people often could only be received in bodily living, and God would not fail to perform his promises. So if (as was particularly the case with the first Jewish martyrs) those promises had not been performed in their lives, then God would restore them to bodily life and so perform them. When Jesus restores the dead to life, this is an instance of this general truth, perhaps an anticipation of it. So Martha says “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection on the last day (John 11.24). Yet Lazarus and the others are simply restored to ordinary bodily life; there is no change in their nature; they will die (again) in due course. Jesus, then, both himself believes *and moreover practices* what many believed – he turns hope into experience.

His own resurrection is not less than this background belief. “He trusted in God, that he would deliver him”, and indeed the Father did just that. But much more. It is easy to get lost in arguments whether the Jews had any consistent expectation concerning the career of the Anointed One (Messiah). (They did not.) There is one Jewish text (4 Esdras 7.29) in which the Anointed One does die – but only because he is *like everybody else* part of this present imperfect earth, and *there is no route into the promised New Earth except death*.

I think it very likely that the Church worked backwards and from facts. First came the experience of the particular form of Jesus' resurrection, then the development of the analysis, which had to include a demonstration that this was always part of God's plan. They did not start from well-developed beliefs about resurrection and the Anointed and invent stories to fit them. We have to remember that the resurrection of Jesus is not like that of Lazarus. Christ “dieth no more”. His new life is indeed bodily (he eats, he can be touched) but it is not just a resuscitation. To put it in (possibly) existing Jewish terms, his resurrection is a beginning, but only in one person, of the life of the New Earth promised to many. Nobody expected this.

We are very lucky to have three independent accounts of the disciples' Easter experiences in the Gospels. They differ, just as the testimony of honest witnesses is likely to differ. But we would be foolish not to accept the consistent evidence that they *were not expecting what they found*. They expected a body partly prepared for burial; they feared a robbed tomb. They did not expect an *immediate* resurrection (before the End Time which would lead to the New Earth). They found no body but also no evidence of robbery; and then Jesus confronted them, but not, as I have said, in a manner conforming to any of the ideas of resurrection which they might have envisaged.

What does this mean? Easter is the beginning for us of God's triumphant purpose, that *“through the grave and gate of death we may pass to our joyful resurrection”* (collect for Easter Even). Jesus is the pioneer, who opens the way for us. But not by making it all easy. Death has not changed. We still have to die, albeit with hope. And it was not easy for him. Even older than the gospels is the passion narrative in Hebrews (5.7-10) *“Who in the days of his flesh having offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and having been heard for his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation; named of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.”*

Jesus is risen. The way to God is open for us. Jesus is the effective priest who provides to his people the means of access to God, of which earthly priesthood is only a reflection. Therefore, as the epistle implies, we can and must respond by beginning the life of the New Earth now; yet for us its perfection will lie the other side of death. We cannot escape death; hence the shocking words I quoted. But we have been given the ability to start living the risen life now. We do so not just because it is the right thing to do, but because Christ is our life. He is already glorified; we shall “also appear with him in glory”.

The readings are: Colossians 3.1-7, John 20.1-10.

We next meet on April 13th and May 25th.