

## TRINITY 2 Yr C 2016

### St David's Eucharist

The widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain had both had their lives torn apart. They expected their future would be a bleak one of trying to make ends meet and living unsupported into an impoverished old age. Neither had any other children who might become bread-winners for them.

When Paul, called Saul at the time, set out from Jerusalem to Damascus he was determined on destruction of the group of Jewish Christians who were practising their faith there. No doubt he would readily have stood and watched them be stoned for blasphemy just as he had done with Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The resurrection of a man condemned to death as a criminal did not fit into his world view, let alone that such a man, cursed under the law, should in fact be the Christ of God.

Neither the widows nor Paul expected what in fact happened to them when they got up on the morning of their encounter with the living and surprising God of Israel, invoked by Elijah and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. And the result in each case was nothing less than new life. The sons were restored to their mothers and Paul found his life moving in completely the opposite direction to what he'd expected.

You won't necessarily remember the name Mervyn Griffith-Jones but you will remember, I expect, the most famous trial that he was involved in at the Old Bailey. He was the prosecutor of Penguin, the publisher of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and whose remarks in his closing speech revealed the profound social changes that were afoot in the early 1960s. 'Would you,' he asked the jury, 'want your wife or your servants to read it?' Question, as my old Latin teacher would have said, expecting the answer 'No'.

Anyway, his son, Robin, was on that excellent radio programme *Midweek* just recently, talking to Libby Purves. He had, he told her, been destined to be a lawyer from his very cradle. That was his father's assumption but, sadly for his father, Robin was determined the last thing he would ever be was a lawyer.

His encounter with God led him in quite a different direction, at least initially. He became ordained and served in a poor parish in Liverpool and at St Martin-in-the-fields amongst London down-and-outs. He also visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta and shared in her work with the destitute and dying on the streets of that great Indian city. All a far cry, in other words, from his privileged upbringing.

But he was on the programme because he's written a book about Dan Brown's best-seller *The Da Vinci code*. He said it contained all that was true about the theory Dan Brown based his novel on and that it was a very short book!

But he was able to write it because – and this is why I mention him – he is now Master of the Temple, the priest in charge of the church at the heart of the legal establishment, ministering often to lawyers and barely 100 yards from where his father’s chambers were.

What do they say – If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans.

We all live with a certain framework around our lives. We all have certain expectations as a result of them. And of course we’re influenced in all that by our own experience of life and the context in which we live it. For us that means, amongst other things, living at a time when the influence of science and technology profoundly shapes the way we see things.

Now it seems to me that these scriptures we’ve had this morning don’t easily fit into that 21<sup>st</sup> century context because they all relate events which defy our normal rational way of thinking. Bringing two young men back to life when they are a corpse doesn’t fit with it, any more than blinding lights and a voice on a Middle Eastern road.

Most people today tend, when faced with such things, to have Alice’s reaction, revealed in this little conversation with the Queen during her adventures in wonderland:

“Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.'

I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

Maybe she practised meditation! What was it Jesus said? 'With God all things are possible'.

I think these scriptures offer a healthy counterbalance to the supposedly rational world we live in where such things as are described there don't happen – and by extension can't happen, it is thought.

But the scientific way that leads us to think that isn't the only way of looking at the world. What people of faith do is offer a different way, and actually one which deals with more profound questions than the ones science can possibly deal with.

At the moment I'm dipping in and out of a book which I commend to you, called *Inventing the Universe*. It's written by someone I knew of only as a theologian but it turns out he's also a properly trained scientist, having studied Chemistry at Oxford and done a doctorate in complex biological systems. Before he went to Oxford he had been an atheist, but he had an intellectual conversion, in one sense very similar to Paul's.

He's Alistair McGrath and I came across his book on one of those display tables in Waterstones where you don't normally find in-your-face theology if I can put it like that. Here's how he describes his change of thinking:

'... though I loved science as a young man, I had a sense that it was not complete. It helped us to understand how things worked. But what did they *mean*? Science gave me a neat answer to the question of how I came to be in this world. Yet it seemed unable to answer a deeper question. *Why* was I here? What was the point of life?' (p2)

Science does not attempt to answer that kind of ultimate question, which is, of course, a very human question. That's the question that can lead to faith. Faith, our Christian faith, doesn't aim to explain how life comes about, it simply asserts that God brought it about as an outpouring of love. We who bear God's image share in that love. We can experience it and it gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

That's what Elijah and Jesus are doing in those readings this morning. They are both motivated in what they do to save the widows' sons by the compassion they feel for them. That compassionate love is our share in the image and likeness of God which all human beings bear, and it brings life with it.

In these two men God's Holy Spirit is powerfully – and in Jesus' case uniquely – present. This is the same Holy Spirit who hovers over the waters at the beginning of creation and who brings order out of chaos – that same order which enables science to discern patterns and laws. But as Julian of Norwich observed, it's God's love that gives the meaning.

So the sons are restored to their mothers and in both cases the mothers recognise that Jesus and Elijah are men of God and that God is really present in them. They don't ask how they did it, they simply know the meaning of what has happened and that it has transformed their lives for good. The 'how question' is secondary; it's the significance that counts.

In his letter to the Galatians we can see how Saul, the Pharisee who persecuted the Church, is now, as Paul the Apostle, wrestling with what his experience means for his faith. And one of the key conclusions he reaches is that it's not rules – laws – that give life purpose and meaning, but God's grace. It's God's loving, unmerited and unexpected action that reveals to him how he must now live his life.

That realisation is what changed Paul's whole intellectual framework and propelled his life in a completely different direction from what he had expected.

This is the difference faith can make and it is a gift of God's grace which transforms our view of creation itself, but also, most importantly it changes the way we view and therefore live our own lives. In his book Alistair McGrath gives a 5-point list of the difference faith has made for him. I found it helpful; I hope you will too. So to finish, here it is.

- 1. It helps me make sense of the world by giving me a way of seeing reality which affirms both its intelligibility and coherence.*
- 2. It gives me a framework which allows me to discern meaning and purpose within life.*
- 3. Faith generates a moral vision that is not of my own making and does not serve my own interests.*
- 4. Faith helps me cope with negative situations by allowing me to see them in a new light.*
- 5. Faith brings hope by enabling me to see my life in a wider context of meaning. 'Hope' here does not mean a groundless optimism, but a firm conviction of present significance and future fulfilment. (p59)*