

## **RICHARD'S EASTER MESSAGE**

### **EASTER DAY 2009**

*(A Sermon preached on Easter morning at Corton Denham, Sherborne, Dorset and for members of The Survey Ships Association)*

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2009**

*Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' which means Teacher. (John 20:16)*

This is the moment to wish each one of you a very Happy Easter; Easter when we should be 'really pleased and very excited'. Really pleased because God's word has been fulfilled and very excited because life will never be the same again.

Our Easter Garden with its empty tomb also has a reminder of the green hill outside the City wall where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all. It's not that Jesus' rising from the dead as he said he would means that we celebrate Easter when everything has worked out alright in the end; that the sad events of Holy Week have somehow simply been put right to provide a nice ending to a story; to provide "closure" to use that awful modern phrase.

Easter is so much more because it takes us to the heart of all that God is seeking to achieve. And there are no short cuts. You can't have Easter without Jesus' time in the desert and his temptations, without the tyranny of popular opinion shown by the crowds on the first Palm Sunday, without the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest and trial on trumpeted up charges and the agony of death on a cross. Easter without all that went before would be just another kind of 'feel good factor' moment.

To get to grips with Easter you have to begin with God's purposes in creation; to recognise how God seeks to reach out and share himself with people who have been graciously and wonderfully created in his own image for no other reason than he would like to share his life and his love with all his creation. It's not without significance that the first Easter occurred at the time of the Jewish Passover when Jewish people look back to their deliverance by God from slavery to freedom. God gives to his people many blessings for which we can only offer him each day our heartfelt thanks.

But God doesn't force himself upon people. Instead as I said to some Confirmation candidates recently, faith comes about when we realise God has kind of 'tapped us on the shoulder' or we when we realise him to be simply walking alongside us in the moments of our life. So the Christian life has much about it that is to do with exploring, discovering and realising.

It's worth recalling many of the experiences of the first disciples who journeyed with Jesus during his teaching and healing ministry. He taught about the kingdom of God in parables using the everyday language of his time that his hearers might grasp what he was saying and make the connections between their lives and God's life and love. He healed – moments when God's life and love were made very real to people. The healing miracles were parables in themselves; teaching by actions about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, a way of describing God's place in his creation, in his world and in the lives of people and our participation in all that God seeks not just for us but the whole human family.

The disciples couldn't always get it. It was because they were living their lives with one ear no doubt to what Jesus taught but at the same time with their other ear

absorbed in the sounds of the everyday world of which they were a part. Despite Jesus foretelling his death and his rising on the third day they still forsook and fled; they just gave up and just ran away leaving him alone; except of course for the women at the foot of the cross and the beloved disciple.

Then comes Easter morning and St. John has recorded the happenings when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. Mary runs to tell the others. They return to the tomb, see it empty and the linen clothes lying there. Still they didn't realise; Peter and the other disciple return to their homes but Mary remains. And then there is a quite extraordinary and unexpected occurrence. Jesus appears but Mary doesn't recognise him but thinks him to be the gardener. It's only when Jesus calls her by name that she realises who he is. Mary, the Apostle's apostle, goes and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord".

But another key event takes place later that day. Two disciples are journeying to Emmaus and talking together about all that has been happening. They are joined by a third person who on hearing their story then tells them that it was necessary for the Messiah to die and he interprets the things about himself in the scriptures beginning with Moses and the prophets. But still they didn't recognise him until later when around the supper table the stranger took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And in that moment the penny dropped and they recognised him.

Today we begin the great celebration of Easter, the fifty days which take us from the Day of Resurrection to the Day of Pentecost. It's as though we need these 50 days each year to help us grasp the full significance of the resurrection not simply as a past event but more importantly as a present experience for us all. Christian

Faith is not about a belief in a moral code, in a philosophy of life, in a Holy Book but about belief in a person who in his life, death and resurrection is someone we can know, and trust and who calls us, like his first disciples, to be his friends.

We don't need to be reminded about how life is full of ups and downs, of joys and sorrows. We live also at this present moment in times when people are under judgement for their materialism and greed, and godlessness. Yet in all our personal circumstances whatever they may be, in all the confusions and way-ward wanderings of communities and nations the resurrection is present as a sign, a reminder of God's way of life and love, seeking to draw all people to himself that his gift of life may be known in all it's fullness.

Jean Vanier the founder of the L'Arche communities has captured the essence of Easter and the Resurrection in a special way. Writing in his book "Drawn into the Mystery of God" he says,

*"There is something so humble in the story of the resurrection. The risen Jesus does not appear triumphant over the Temple to signify to everyone his victory and to humiliate those who humiliated him.*

*He appears to Mary of Magdala, the loved one, the forgiven one, alone in a garden. Jesus shares a simple, heart-to-heart relationship with her, a gentle moment of eternity. He does not appear with power but with a gentle love".*

And so I wish you not just a Happy Easter, but a Holy and Happy Easter; an Easter which is completed by a new discovery of God's concern for each one of us which is the beginning of the path of holiness, of wholeness. A Holy and Happy Easter full of his gentle love and joy to be matched in 50 days time by the joy of

Pentecost the realisation that through his spirit the risen Christ is with us and for us now and always.