

BIBLE READINGS: Romans 6:1-5 Luke 24:36b-48

SERMON

Ghosts don't eat fish.

The hard part about the Resurrection is that it really happened. If the constant witness of the Gospels is to be believed, around 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ died, was buried and three days later rose again. This is not an image; not a picture; not a movie; not a make-up story; not a ghost story to frighten the children. This really happened. Ghosts don't eat fish.

To try to understand that, let me tell you another ghost story. It's an old one told by comedian Dave Allen. There was a man who had a little too much to drink in the pub and made his way home late at night by a short-cut through a cemetery. In his drunken state he forgot about a grave which was being dug and tumbled into it. Thoroughly relaxed, he made a soft landing and did himself no harm. But the grave was deep and it had been raining so he found it very difficult to climb out. He kept taking a run at the walls, getting so far up and then slithering back down. Again and again he tried. No joy. Eventually, very tired and sleepy, he gave up, and settled down, philosophically, in a corner to wait until morning.

A little while later another drunk stumbled cheerfully out of the pub and set off through the same cemetery to make his way home. Exactly the same thing happened. He forgot about the open grave and fell straight in, was unhurt, and started the same hopeless process of trying to scramble out up the steep sides. He was no more successful than the other drunk, but went on trying and trying.

Meanwhile, the earlier arrival, stirred in his corner and watched the efforts being made. Up, up, up, almost out and then the slippery slide back to the ground. The second-comer was about to throw himself into yet another run at it. Helpfully the other fellow reached out of the darkness, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "You know you'll never make it."

But he did.

It is wonderful the way in which that final line, "But he did", conjures up such a vivid picture of vigorous action prompted by absolute terror. The poor man who had failed to clamber out of the hole many times was so scared when he thought he had been touched and spoken to by a ghost in the grave that he shot out like a bullet. You know you'll never make it... But he did.

One of the wonderful things about the Easter Gospel is that it accommodates many different responses to itself, including the most sceptical. "Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your minds?" It allows even for a certain cynicism. "They still could not believe it."

Jesus Christ, Risen from the Dead, the Saviour of the World, speaks to doubt as well as to devotion. He presents Himself to everyone. He shows Himself not, first, for worship, or veneration or even discipleship. But in solidarity. He has gone down into whatever pit we have found ourselves. Perhaps our particular pit is something which we could have avoided had we been more sober or more attentive to the dangers along our route? Or is our hole-in-the-ground some trouble such as afflicted the innocent Jesus? Someone else's foolishness or sin? Or maybe what we have tumbled into is just our mortality? Infirmity of body or purpose? Weakness, frailty, the fragility of goodness? Wherever we are, whatever darkness might surround us, however deep the hole, the Risen Lord approaches, yes to rescue us, but first just to be with us, to stand beside us, as one who has gone through this also. And he reaches out to touch us and to say a kindly word.

Now, as in the Dave Allen story, the effect of Christ's reaching out and of His word is to propel us out of the grave, to allow us to do what we have long tried to do, but have not succeeded, until grace intervened. But the propulsion, the galvanising factor, what pushes us up, up, up, and out of what had us slipping and sliding before, is not, in this case, fear, not a terror of ghosts. Rather it is Jesus Himself who energises us. It was for you, in the first place, that God raised up his servant. Faith allows us to believe that He, Risen from the Dead, is with us this day, now, and forever. And because of this, all of the disciples lives' are changed utterly. They will go from being a frightened band of failed disciples of a dead prophet, to being the first tellers of the new Gospel of the Risen Lord. They are witnesses to this, the Resurrection. And because of that, all our lives are also changed utterly. We are taken from our own narrow, selfish concerns; our little muddy lives and made the inheritors of the apostles. We, in our generation, are called to the tellers of the Gospel of the Risen Lord.

'So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.' We are all witnesses to this. Let us pray that we may be faithful witnesses to this.