

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Peter and the Resurrection

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 20th March 2011

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

Peter was there when Jesus was raised from death. Peter was, as he never forgot, a witness to the resurrection. He spent the rest of his life talking about it, bearing witness. He was a witness to Jesus returning from death and to the reaction of other people to this: his own reaction, the disciples' reaction, Thomas' reaction. Peter was a witness. But he was more than that. Peter realised that being a witness to the resurrection was important, and so he pondered, he considered, he thought deeply about what it meant, that God raised Jesus from death. Why did it happen? What was the point?

There were a few weeks between the resurrection and Peter's first attempt to make sense of it for others, when he preached to the crowd on the day of Pentecost; a few weeks for him to ponder and draw conclusions. The conclusions he drew were about God. The resurrection, he said, spoke of God's vulnerability and God's power. Let's listen in to some of the thoughts he may have had as he pondered in these few weeks.

“I walked around with Jesus. I saw what happened. I saw him turn water into wine. I saw him feed the crowds from almost nothing. I saw him heal the blind and the deaf and the lepers and the lame. I saw him walk on water and still the storm. I saw him raise the dead, not once, not twice, but three times. I saw all this and it was obvious that these were signs of something. No one else was going around doing this. They were obviously signs of God's power with Jesus.

“But as I walked around with him, I saw other miracles: ones which were not so obvious unless you were always at his side. I heard him teach, you see. I didn't just see what he did, or hear of it. I heard him offer forgiveness, when that seemed blasphemous; and I heard him say that we needed to forgive each other, time without number and from the heart. I heard him declare that we should be perfect as God is. I heard him say that we should turn the other cheek, when we are assaulted, and go the second mile when our service is demanded of us. I heard him say that our yes should be trusted and our no mean what it says. And I watched him. And I knew that these were not just words. This was really how Jesus lived. Jesus lived as he taught. He never let his own teaching down. He never had to hide what he did from anyone, lest his inconsistency be shown up. There was no inconsistency. And that too was surely a sign and an act of God's power. No one else can be so wholly consistent.

“So I saw that God's power was shown in Jesus' life, and that was good. It is good to see God's power, because if God has no power, what is the point of him? What is the point of seeking him and serving him and believing in him?

“But then I saw Jesus handed into the power of others. I saw that he was given into the power of those who were outside the law. I saw him crucified, and I was shaken and grieved by it. It seemed so wrong. It seemed so unjust, for he had done nothing to deserve it, nothing wrong at all. How could God allow his Holy One, his Son, as I believe, to be so vulnerable? But how could he not? If Jesus were not vulnerable, would I have followed him? Would his life and

doings be such a miracle? Would he not have seemed distant and unreachable? It is only since Jesus returned to us that I have realised that it seemed unjust because it was unjust. It seemed wrong because it was wrong. It was wrong, but it was no accident. It's only when I can look back that I can see that God had to allow injustice to seem to triumph, so that he could redeem it.

“With God there are no accidents. Whatever happens through human choices becomes woven into God's plan, and when what happens seems evil it is woven in to its redemption. When what happens is good it is woven in to God's praise: but good or evil, God can work to transform everything to his glory.

“Jesus was not held by his unjust death. It was impossible that he could be held. It was impossible because God had promised, through David, in the Psalm (16) that his Holy One would not see corruption. And Jesus was holy: his life had shown that. So it was impossible that death and corruption should hold him. It was impossible because of who God is: totally just and full of power.

“And of course, Jesus having been raised - and he was, and I am a witness to that - proves that he is God's Holy One whom corruption could not touch. He is God's Holy One, now at God's right hand but still, by the Spirit, very active in the world.”

Thoughts like these must have gone through Peter's head for him to preach as he did at Pentecost. He preached a gospel of resurrection which proves God's power, proves not that at the last gasp God's power proved just enough to wrest Jesus back from death, but proves that all along God was in control, and that nothing that happened in Jesus' life and death was not capable of being part of God's redemptive plan for the world.

Peter was preaching to a crowd made up of some who had seen some of Jesus' life quite close up, some who had seen from a distance and some who had heard little but distorted rumours. As far as accepting the resurrection went, most of them were those whom he was urging to believe without having seen. We live in a very similar society, in some ways. Of course we don't dress the same, or use the same currency, or live under Roman rule. But we live among those who have heard very little about Jesus, and those who have got hold of some rather distorted and garbled rumours about who he was and what he did. We too need to tell the truth about God's love and power. We need to think it through, as Peter obviously did, and then speak it clearly and live it just as transparently. We need the truth about the resurrection to be seen in us, even as Peter, who was prepared to stand up when it was dangerous and talk about his Lord, allowed it to be seen in him.

Later in his life, when he had had much longer to think about it, had spent many more years bearing witness, Peter again spoke of the effect of the resurrection, this time in a letter. If his earlier reflections had caused him to preach about God's power, his years of reflection and service turned his attention to thinking about the effect of the resurrection for those who believed. Here are some of what he may have thought before he came to write down his letter.

“I have spent a lot of time now with the church, with those who have come to believe and to seek, by God's power, to follow Jesus. And of course I have been trying to keep following myself. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we fall down and get it badly wrong. But we can try and we do try and we don't fear failing. Because one thing I have noticed about those of us who live in the light of the resurrection, is that for us the character of human life is changed. It is changed for the present as well as for the future.

“When Jesus was raised it was the promise that we too could have a new birth - bring born again just as he said to Nicodemus all those years ago - and our new birth gives us a hope that keeps on growing. We are born into this new life, which keeps on being renewed, so that we can keep trying to follow and not give up in despair when we fail, but simply come to God and try again. What wonderful freedom is ours, compared to the rigidity and fear to try things that we knew before.

“And because we have a new birth, we are God's children in a new and different way. And as God's children, we are given an inheritance. In fact being God's children is our inheritance. It means that we have a family home and family goods and possessions waiting for us, being kept safe for us by God himself. God protects and guarantees that we have a future hope. But he also keeps us safe as well, as we work and wait and grow towards our inheritance. And I know that it hasn't always felt like I was safe. And some of my brothers have found it to be physically most unsafe: we will never forget the shock of James' death, or Stephen's. And it may happen to me one day. I know that.

“But we are safe, even if we suffer. Suffering simply tests us, proves our faith to ourselves. And it purifies us, helps us to realise what is really important and spend less time and effort on the other things. And our suffering, joyfully endured, brings glory to Christ - and what do we desire more than that, ever? We are safe, because God is protecting us for a purpose: for salvation. Nothing now, is going to stop those of us who follow Jesus being given God's salvation. Not since God raised him from the dead.

“And so the character of life is changed. Although we still sleep and rise, still rest and work, still eat and talk and suffer, just like everyone else, we know purpose and joy in our lives such as we never knew before. We know love for Jesus, even though some of us did not know him in person the way I did. We know hope and we have direction in our lives. God raised Jesus from death and our lives were as much changed and renewed as his, with his, and like his, for eternity.”

Peter had learned that the resurrection was the most powerful, ongoing influence on life that there could be. He learned that living in the light of Christ's resurrection would change his whole outlook on life, and he had seen the same transformation happen for many others. We live in Peter's era. We live on the far side of Jesus' death and resurrection, and while the facts of Jesus' death and rising speak to us of God's vulnerability - accessibility - and power; the ongoing effect of the resurrection should be to make us bold and joyful in living and witnessing with purpose and passion for Jesus our Lord. God grant that the joy of Jesus' risen life fill ours and change us to be his purposeful people.

Amen.