

What's

New ?

What's New?

Collected reflections on the Easter Season Sunday Readings
from the Revised Common Lectionary,
for year C (2022 etc).

Andrew Knight

This book is offered under the Creative Commons Licence



Attribution-NonCommercial

CC BY-NC

- which means that you are welcome to copy, share and adapt it,
but not to sell it.

Easter Sunday

1 Corinthians 15. 19-26 or Acts 10. 34-43; (John 20. 1-18) or Luke 24. 1-12

Why Resurrection?

Where does the Resurrection of Jesus fit into Christian thinking? So much seems already complete on Good Friday: Jesus had become High Priest and offered one sacrifice for all time; he has given his example, and his body and blood. Yet the resurrection is central in early preaching, for two main reasons.

First (as we see in [1 Corinthians 15:19-26](#)) because the power of death has been broken. Someone has come back. So the perspective of this letter – and all Christians – is longer than a human lifespan. (So verse 19, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” – but our perspective is eternal). Many people like to think their loved ones continue after death – but without any reason for their hope. Jesus gives reason, and structure, to that hope.

Secondly, the resurrection transformed the disciples, because God raised Christ. This was most dramatic for Paul. As Saul the Pharisee, he was sure Jesus was a false teacher: his attitude to the Law and Tradition; his taking authority to himself; and the claim to be Son of God – all, in Saul’s thinking, condemned him. But then Saul, persecutor of Christians, met the risen Jesus. Since he was alive, by the power of God, he must be right – and all Saul’s ideas wrong where they differed. The resurrection of Jesus is the most wholehearted affirmation of his life and work.

So, the Resurrection shows life beyond death, giving a new perspective to human life. It proves Jesus’ authority to be that of God the Father. And so it reminds us that Christianity is Christ – we are his followers, he is our Lord.

Telling the story

How would you tell the story of Jesus? Or, for somebody who knew parts of it, but not the significance, how would you order it? These are important questions if faith is to reach two or even three lost generations in the West. Acts 10 tells the story of Peter’s visit to the non-Jewish Cornelius, and the section we read today ([Acts 10:34-43](#)) covers what he said to the gathered household.

First, he does not confuse the issue with his own feelings. The event is of enormous importance to Peter, as he goes takes the message of Jesus outside the Jewish world for the first time. (Read Acts 10:9-17 to understand something of the struggle it involved). Yet his two verses of explanation (vv33,34) are directed to explain his presence to his audience, not to chart his own journey and new insight!

Secondly, Peter makes clear that God’s message is about Jesus, and delivered through the events of Jesus’ life. There is reference to the events at his Baptism (also read today), but verses 39-41 go straight to the death and resurrection. This is central to Christian faith, and Peter wastes no time in making that clear.

His stress on the importance of Jesus, and the corresponding lack of self-importance, or demands for institutional affiliation, are also a great help in the search for unity among Christians. Faith is shared by those who follow Jesus as Lord. They have a variety of leaders, organisations, and traditions – some of lasting value, but none of these are definitive. When we tell the story of Jesus, it is not to increase attendance at our preferred place or worship, or to add donors to its finances, but to share the faith which brings life and hope. New believers may “join” other groups – but we must rejoice if they are joined to the faithful!

If Peter spoke along these lines – it seems likely this is a summary, and he used more words than are written here – we should notice how effective this was. Verses 44-48 show the power of God breaking out, reminding us that the Holy Spirit is not under control. (This is one time when the Spirit came before Baptism with water). It doesn’t need a great speaker to manipulate an audience; a humble person who will tell the story of Jesus as something of importance can release the power of God to help and heal.

If you wonder how to tell the story of Jesus, make sure it is just that – the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection. For those who come to believe, expect God’s power to show in changing lives – but lives that change in God’s agenda, not yours or that of your congregation!

All Change!

Reading the accounts of the empty tomb (like Luke 24:1-12) – which in itself proves nothing, but is a necessary prelude to the appearances of the risen Jesus – we encounter confusion. The women, and then the disciples, are shocked. Emotionally exhausted, they cannot take it in, and there is much denial, even of the good news.

I think it was Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who first identified the typical stages of loss. Clergy, and others who have done courses in counselling or pastoral care, will be familiar with the sequence in theory; we will all have encountered it in practise. Not only bereavement, but any serious loss – redundancy (perhaps retirement); moving away from home or family; losing health.

Any major loss will provoke a reaction; while different for each person, it may involve the stages, roughly in sequence:

Denial, Grief, Anger, Bargaining, Acceptance

Longer or shorter, they cannot be entirely escaped as we adjust to a new reality, and adapt our expectations and habits. It’s hard work.

So perhaps we can understand how it was for the early disciples. It was not that Jesus death brought grief, and his resurrection made it all well again. In fact his resurrection complicates things, and adds to the turmoil. Perhaps we see glimpses of anger in Thomas’ stubborn denial, and bargaining when Peter goes fishing. It will take time for them to come through it all and adjust to the new situation, wonderful though it is. The 40 days to the Ascension, and 50 to Pentecost, were not God taking his time so much as God realising that the disciples needed time.

And what about us? There seems to be an idea that the Easter story is very nice, and has nothing to do with us, at least not personally. And that’s denial. The death and resurrection of Jesus the

Messiah has everything to do with us; it changes our personal world beyond all imagining. And our work as Christians is to come to terms with that, face up to it, and live in the real world.

Denial won't do. We must be kindly led to face the facts: Jesus died, and was raised from the dead, and nothing will ever be the same again. We may have to deal with grief – that we can't just do as we want, that our ambitions have to be adjusted, that our gifts cannot be exploited just for our own benefit. There may be anger – somebody has moved the goalposts; the world we thought we knew, and succeeded in, has disappeared. We have lost our old life – yes, the new may be better, but the old was familiar, secure, predictable. You can carry on the analogy – I don't want to argue the details.

My point is just this: as we read those accounts of the empty tomb, as we notice the confusion, the shock and denial, as we are perhaps tempted to patronise the women, or the disciples? But have we done any better? Have we truly worked through the loss of our old lives and adapted to the new life in Christ – or is it not closer to the truth to say that we are in denial. “Yes, lovely story, but nothing to do with me, (at least in any practical sense)”

We need negotiation and adaptation, time for the hard work of getting used to a new setup.

But it is important that, as we work through in our own way,

we avoid fantasy and denial

and live effectively and with reality in a new world. Christ is alive; nothing is the same – and very few people seem to have understood!

Second Sunday of Easter

Revelation 1. 4-8 or Acts 5. 27-32; John 20. 19-31

It's a Revelation!

For some people, Revelation is a book of horrors and nightmares, but I want to convince you otherwise. We have 6 readings from Revelation in the next 6 weeks, and they have some positive things to say. So [Revelation 1:4-8](#) starts off with the offer of free gifts. Not a bad strategy, but are they worth having? – you judge:

“**grace** and **peace** be yours from God” verse 4

Not just God being nice to us, although we don't deserve it (good!), but also we are given grace. I wonder if we take that seriously enough. Peace – again, not only are we no longer in rebellion against God, but we are given peace, not to worry about everything ?! not bad, and not finished:

“by his sacrificial death he has **freed us**”

free gifts in 8 verses – its enough to get you in the habit of Bible-Reading! But there's more. There is a good deal here about Jesus. We tend to think of Jesus the preacher and teacher, but this is later:

“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness “

to God's ways and nature, which we need to know about;

“first to be raised from death”

The first, not only one who will be resurrected.

“ruler of the kings”

Now in power, exercising great power, in a way we still need to learn about.

“first and last”

Alpha and Omega, the A-Z of the Greek alphabet. We might say something like “Pioneer and Last Word”.

Was . . Is . . is to come.

This is a different picture, and an important one – the Lord of power, who won the highest place by obedience in accepting the lowest.

Free Gifts, from a Lord with power and honour, and then there's us:

“He loves us “

You can't truly say that of many in power, but Jesus has demonstrated the point, and still does!

“made us a kingdom of priests” ?

We are all to bring people to God, and God to people; here we are told it is what we are for.

Why? “to serve his God and Father” can you think of anyone better to serve? even yourself? (do you live up to his standard?). So here we are, in Revelation, blessed with Free Gifts, given by a

Risen and Powerful Lord, so that we may not live selfishly and idly, but be equipped and ready to serve God in a ministry to all the world. Surely that is worth paying attention to?

Look at Them

After Easter, we have a series of readings from Acts. (Taking the place of the first or second lesson, today we read Acts 5:37-42). They are important because they show, in a more than theoretical way, the effect of Jesus' resurrection on the early Christian Church.

Today's reading has a group of apostles in front of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. In some ways it repeats Acts 4, where Peter and John were brought before the Council for preaching the power of the risen Jesus after the healing of the beggar at the Temple gate.

“ordered . . . not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” 4:18 they continue. A larger group were arrested and put in prison, but let out by an angel. When the Council want to question them, they have to be fetched without violence from the Temple, where they are preaching again.

The first thing to note is the change in the apostles. The men who ran away when Jesus was arrested now come into Court with confidence to speak as the Holy Spirit directs (Mark 13:11ff). What they have to say is clear, not aggressive or abusive, but not at all welcome!

It is significant that they take no credit for themselves. What has happened has been God's action in raising Jesus. The whole emphasis is on this, not on their role, nor to use the situation to their advantage. They must, they say, obey God rather than any human authority: setting an important principle.

Sadly, this seems to be a principle the Council have not learnt. Matthew Henry's old commentary comments “Had Christ been exalted to give dominion to Israel, the chief priests would have welcomed him. But repentance and remission of sins are blessings they neither valued nor saw their need of”

The Council are angered by their inability to counter the teaching and signs the disciples give. They are also furious at (the truth) the blaming of the Council for Jesus' death. Their power is in question, and their temper roused. On this occasion, Gamaliel will hold them back – for a time.

With so much going on, I wonder what affects you. Is it:

- the change in the apostles – now confident and clear they are in speaking in the power of the Holy Spirit (even when deliberately intimidated)?
- Is it their focus on what God has done in the death and resurrection of Jesus – the core of the gospel?
- Or perhaps you are drawn to question the importance of repentance and the forgiveness of sins for yourself?

Whichever, Acts shows us how Jesus' resurrection changed everything – not just in theory, but as the lived and witnessed.

Doubt Properly

It is important to encourage the right sort of doubt – and not the wrong sort. But do we know the difference? John ([John 20:19-31](#)) tells the story of the first Easter evening. Jesus appeared to the disciples, but Thomas was absent, and refused to believe their story. It must have been a difficult week! When Jesus appears to them all, a week later, Thomas outdoes the others in his declaration of faith.

So, what is good or bad doubt? Bad doubt is an excuse. I can't prove that my choice of spouse will be right – so I won't make a commitment in marriage. I can't prove that my choice of career is correct, so I won't put energy into doing it well. I can't prove the politicians will be honest – so I won't bother to vote. You can go on. Bad doubt feeds cynicism, laziness, lack of faith in people as well as God. There are many things we either cannot prove in advance, or don't try to. (I drive a car, but don't check the brakes every time I start off).

Thomas teaches us a sort of doubt which may not be comfortable, but looks for an answer. Jesus resurrection is so unlikely, he wants good reason to take it seriously. What a week he must have had! When he gets his reason – as Jesus invites his checking – he is ready to change his opinion and commit. Without his doubt, would he – could he – have been as firm in his following a Risen Lord? Good doubt is helpful, encouraging us to ask the right questions – questions which can deepen understanding, strengthen conclusions, sharpen our perception of reality.

Learn to encourage good doubt, in others as well as yourself. It will save you believing advertisements, not bothering to check, but it will also provide a basis for living by faith, with confidence.

Third Sunday of Easter

Revelation 5. 11-14 or Acts 9. 1-6, [7-20]; John 21. 1-19

Music, and dangerous things.

Your choice of music says more about you than you might think! Whether you listen or perform, is it loud and angry, romantic fantasy, something you don't pay attention to, or just old fashioned? Would you admit to it, or insist on it?

Much the same is true of groups of Christians. Their choice of music says a lot. Is it so loud you drown everything else? Is it so old that only people in the "in group" can sing it? Perhaps more important, can there be new songs, but also the learning of old ones? Can one set of instruments to accompany give place to another? And, do the words matter? Do they say anything significant?

Lots of questions there, and you might begin to work out my preferences – which are not really the important thing. They do, however, give us a way in to that glimpse of heaven we have in [Revelation 5:11-14](#). The picture is of vast numbers, singing praise to the Lamb who was slain – Jesus. He is at the centre, and is worshipped for his sacrifice. There is no doubt here what matters. We don't know the music – it is not even clear if words are said or sung – but the content is significant.

Jesus is worthy to receive a number of *very dangerous things*:

- Power. We say that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We are cynical about politicians, the rich and the famous because of the power they hold. Yet Jesus is worthy to receive power – because he has shown how he will use it, truly in love for humanity, even his enemies.
- Wealth. Wealth brings power and freedom. Jesus has shown a new way of using both power and freedom. Not only is all wealth his by virtue of creation and redemption. He deserves it!
- Wisdom. His life choices were indeed strange to our eyes. A simple life, voluntary suffering, setting aside many ordinary pleasures and indeed things we would call rights. His wisdom is proved by its effects, and he is indeed worthy to receive more.
- Strength. How many people would you put in a position of control over you? There is one you can rely on never to abuse that, and more, to be worth serving and obeying always.
- Honour, glory and praise. Let's take three together. Each is deserved by Jesus for his service to each and to all, yet in each case, more should be given. The Lord of Calvary should be honoured, as God should always be honoured – not with pious words, but with heartfelt respect. Glory is not "glitz", or celebrity "spin"; it is the wonder and admiration due to self-giving love. Praise is more than a condescending "well done". It is the use of words which remind us of just what has been achieved, and help us to live in thankfulness, and imitation, and deliberate response.

Revelation 5:10 is quite an anthem! But the next verse brings an echo to the heavenly chorus from all creation. Now the figure on the throne and the Lamb are linked, and we understand God the Father and God the Son (one of those Biblical references which will be later rationalised in the

doctrine of the Trinity). And they are to receive: praise and honour and glory and power. That is the last three, and the first, of those dangerous things offered to Jesus.

That response asks us if we are ready to join in. Have we taken note of the sacrifice of Good Friday and the power of the Resurrection? Are we now ready to give “praise and honour and glory and power” – not words, but actions, priorities worked out in practice day by day? It makes sense, and although these are dangerous things to hand over, there is no-one better to hold and use them.

The four living creatures said, “Amen”. They didn’t mean “Worship over, what’s next?”, but “We agree, count us in, we’re all for it”. Are we?

Just Saul?

Saul is changed. And that is important!

You will be told that people don't change. Some politicians will suggest categorising people, and putting some out of circulation, as if they were human rubbish. Other people will tell you that everybody is free to choose, and take the consequences. The truth is somewhere between, and a little more complicated.

Since the first human sin, rebelling against the rule of God, we all have the sinful inclination, the tendency to get it wrong. Selfishness is natural, but not good. People, - people like us -, need to change.

How? The Church in Wales Governing Body was asked about the greatest gift the Church could give Wales, and what we wanted the essential evidence of Anglican Christianity to be. Answers included:

Being there; accessibility; Community; Spirituality; Acceptance . .

but actually these things are secondary, consequences. They matter – like the welcome you get when you go to church. But the welcome comes from what we believe.

How was Saul, persecutor of Christians, changed? By the risen Jesus. It didn't just happen – Saul/Paul had to be willing, and Ananias and the other Christians had an important part, too. But there was a power in this that wasn't human, or social.

So, as we celebrate Jesus risen at Easter:

how are we changing – no, let's start with

do we understand that is part of the faith, - being changed? That's very important. Some people will go to Church because they enjoy it, but never seem to understand that they need to engage. It's not just about “them”. Christianity is very much about you and the risen Jesus.

Yes, he knows how you really are, and loves you anyway; but that doesn't mean you just carry on. Let him get to work through His Spirit, - it needs your permission, more, you to work with Him – and there'll be changes. You'll probably like them, and so will people round you, who may see them before you do.

What sort of change? What will happen first? - I can't tell you that. You can stop it happening, but the agenda is not your choice (or any other person's). Saul would not have been the choice of the Christian community – but God was right! The changed man was powerful in helping God to reach and change many more lives for the better.

I think some of the disciples in today's gospel thought they were going back to being fishermen. They didn't realise how much had changed, and how much they had changed – but they would, as Jesus sorted them out. Don't just wonder about them, talk to him about you.

Can we go back now?

“Can we go back now?” You’ve just started a long walk, or you’re 10 minutes into a day’s shopping, when a little voice asks: “Can we go back now?”. But it’s not only children. Grown ups get nostalgic: we long for the “good old days”, for the time when we were young, for school or student friends, above all, for the time when the world sang our tune.

So (in [John 21:1-19](#)) – the disciples go fishing. They don’t like sitting around, they don’t like not knowing, they like fishing. It’s what they know, it’ll get them out of the house, they can do something useful ... But it’s not the same, and when Jesus meets them early in the morning, there’s nothing to show for a night’s work. They’d forgotten that other time that Luke told in his gospel [chapter 5], when they fished all night, caught nothing, and Jesus showed them where to find the fish – which they caught in such numbers that they nearly sank! That had been when Peter really started with Jesus.

This time again, Jesus shows he knows what he’s talking about. Once again they share a meal with him; many of those shared meals had been important – not just the Last Supper in Jerusalem. After the meal, Jesus calls Peter again – but it’s a different Peter now. This isn’t the “grown up” swaggering, boastful Peter. He’s grown down, deflated, with less mouth and more ear. It’s not an easy chat they have, walking along the beach. But now Peter knows there’s no going back – and it’s not just fishing that he’s giving up, the old Peter is gone, whatever replaces him.

So what about your attitude to faith and Church? Be clear it is not for a reminder of the “good old days”, a nostalgic trip to when we were young, and things were proper. As Peter and John discovered, there’s no going back, things are different now. No, this is no trip down memory lane. We go forward with the power of Jesus’ Resurrection, and his commission to evangelise and serve. We are all committed to a new life, and to living it with joy and thanksgiving.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 7. 9-17 or Acts 9:36-43; John 10. 22-30

Journey's End – and God's victory

The picture in the second part of Revelation 7 ([Revelation 7:9-17](#)) is pretty crowded, but it gives a welcome sight of the Victory of God, and of our journey's end.

Christians can be rather inclined to self-pity, which for those of us in western countries today is rather odd – life in the first century was much harder for the faithful! Remember that Revelation is the vision given to a man living in exile. Earlier in this chapter (Revelation 7:2-4) we are told of destructive powers held back for “sealing” of 144,000. These are not the total number of Christians, but represent the martyrs. The seal does not prevent their death, but protects against “accidental” death, so that their witness (martyrdom) may be accomplished.

If that is rather sombre, we quickly move on to the multitude who are celebrating victory, their triumphant passage through persecution. They wear white robes

- which , reinforced by their holding palm branches, are symbols of victory
- and also symbols of purity (they are “washed . . in the blood of the Lamb”. All Saints are sinners, pure because of forgiveness and grace, gained from the sacrifice Jesus made of himself)

And who are this joyful crowd? They are the ones who have come through the “great tribulation” (“terrible persecution” in GNB) – not just hardship and death, but conflicts of loyalties: faith and family / social position / demands of the state / self interest. They have come through, and kept the faith, and their reward is appropriate, magnificent and eternal (verses 15-17). They are not only the famous figures of Christian history, but all the faithful, and as in this vision we see them in heaven, so we have the encouragement of seeing where we are going, and what will get us there.

Life, Safety, and Service

I don't know how you see the idea of the Good Shepherd . I really struggle with the over-sentimental view often pictured. Brecon Cathedral even has a stained glass window with pink sheep – presumably washed, tinted and blow dried for the occasion! (Rather as they are presented in the Royal Welsh Show!)

The story of Peter and Tabitha, Ac 9:36-43 is realistic, yet pictures the flock as a place for Life, Safety, and Service

Life: Peter does as Jesus had done. Jesus had raised the dead three times (Jairus daughter, the son of the widow at Nain, and Lazarus). Life is restored, here dramatically, but it was an exceptional picture of what was meant to happen, spiritually and less dramatically, in the flock. As people find faith, and their place among the faithful, it really is finding life!

Safety: Why does God do this, and Luke record it? Tabitha's raising is a great encouragement for the Christian community, one which teaches them about the Resurrection. It says important things

about the goodness of God, reflected in a woman who used her opportunities to the full, as is shown by the grief at her loss. Let's make more of the goodness of God, and recognise that the flock is a place of safety, where we experience that goodness. We say words of thanksgiving week by week, but I'm not convinced that the significance has sunk in. Just as Tabitha was a good thing in her community, so God is very much more so for us.

Life, safety, and **service**. Yes, Tabitha had made clothes, but look at Peter. His leadership is very much endorsed; nobody can say he doesn't know what he is doing – yet he acts only after prayer, and does not repeat this miracle. Peter is learning that Christian service is not just a matter of keeping rules. Far from it, he has to be close to God to know what God is doing, and work with it. The next chapter will see him challenged to take the gospel to Gentiles – the Roman soldier Cornelius and his household. Peter will struggle, but will hear and obey as the gospel goes forward in a new direction.

The raising of Tabitha is a sensational story, yet very realistic. Peter, getting it right, is less impulsive than he used to be, but facing up to a big challenge. The poor are apparently most concerned about their clothing supplies. Yet somebody there had the wit, insight, or rather faith to send for Peter and not interfere – was it the churchwardens, or the PCC? This is a church where shepherding is happening; the flock is not perfect, but there is life, safety, and service. It is a picture I could wish to see re-enacted in every congregation.

Messiah and Good Shepherd?

The Festival of Dedication – Hanukkah, at Christmastime, remembered the re-dedication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus after he threw the Greeks out of Jerusalem (John 10:22-30, especially verse 22). A time when thoughts of freedom, and God's Messiah, came up. So – Was Jesus the Messiah – and why wouldn't he say so?

I think you know. He was the Messiah, all that he had done pointed to it. But if he said so, it would just start an argument. People needed, not to argue, but to think for themselves – and follow up their conclusions by action.

That's still true. Preachers tend not to shout at you much. Why? It doesn't do anything useful. The stories are told, connections and suggestions offered. You have to take responsibility for weighing it up – and taking action. Is Jesus the Messiah, or something else? I think he's the Messiah, and that's the basis of my following Him. Make your own mind up – and act on the conclusion!

Then there is the difficult verse John 10:26 "but you will not believe, for you are not my sheep."

Difficult because:

- It divides the flock (who believe – with much more than a correct opinion) from those who do not; – a critical division. Seen clearly in the story of Jesus, we still fail to apply it in our own time. Are you part of the flock of God, or not? "Independent sheepishness" is not on offer.
- It reminds us that faith is a gift. On the one hand, no one is prevented from following Jesus / joining the flock. On the other, faith is a gift. There is an undeniable truth in the doctrine of Predestination. There is a paradox, difficult to hold together logically. Faith is a gift, yet those who lack it are held responsible for the actions of their faithless life.

The benefits of being in the flock are real, but not always romantic. The sheep who know the shepherd are themselves known. Those who follow the shepherd are led to food, water, and safe rest. That does not mean a selfish life – everything you want and nothing else; nor does it avoid the robust realities of getting on with the other sheep. But the difference between that, and life outside, without guidance and protection, or even hope of forgiveness and escaping the consequences of failure, are breathtaking.

The image of the Good Shepherd may be romanticised by some, but not by Jesus. He understands the division between the flock and those not included as key to the future.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 21. 1-6, or Acts 11:1-18; John 13. 31-35

Heaven is . .

Where we get our own way, where we are proved to be right, whatever we want it to be . . . ? I don't think so, but we need to look further into John's vision for some basis beyond opinion and hopefulness. ([Revelation 21:1-6](#))

It's clear that heaven is wonderful, and like the new earth, untarnished and unspoiled. It is where God will be with his people, which takes away stress, pain, and all that is wrong. On the one hand there will be re-creation, making things right, and restoring people. (That is what recreation is meant to do for us, though the version we know is more imperfect!).

But heaven will not be without challenge, at least initially. To be in the presence of God means that truth will prevail – no arguments over who did what, or deserved better. That truth will include our living with ourselves, and with others, without excuse or secrets. Perhaps that will only be possible because we shall live with God, who knows all, and loves. But it may suggest just how different, how much beyond our imagining, let alone our experience, heaven will be.

Of course God will be our focus. He is the Beginning and the End (Alpha and Omega – first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). So, rather than be “the religious bit” of our lives, to be given its place (among others), God becomes the centre – of a renewed existence, in love, and truth, and wonder. Like cool fresh water to the thirsty, God gives what is missing, what is so much needed.

It is beyond imagining – and so we need to be a little careful about letting wishful thinking replace the glimpse scripture gives us. But it is a magnificent glimpse!

Outsiders Acts 11:1-18

Peter is in trouble; he has really offended important members of the Church, and not just one or two! It was an important part of Jewish tradition that Jews did not eat with Gentiles. It was the way the faith was kept pure, and since the Maccabean wars of the second century BC a test of loyalty to the faith. Yet Acts 10 ends with Peter staying as the house guest of a Roman centurion, Cornelius, “for several days”. This sort of behaviour threatens the lifestyle and assumptions of Jewish Christians, and they are demanding answers.

So Peter tells the story, noting that he had taken six men with him from Joppa, and they can be his witnesses. He goes back to his strange vision, of all sorts of animals which he is told to kill and eat, but refuses according to Jewish law. He is told “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”.

As he wakes up, messengers arrive to call him to – a Gentile household, by tradition an unclean, profane place for a Jew. He makes the connection. He goes to Caesarea, and hears how the Spirit has been at work in this household. As he speaks about the good news of Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes on his hearers. Peter sees God at work, very obviously in Cornelius and his family, but also

in preparing him for a new advance in the gospel. The household is baptised, and Peter stays to give further instruction.

It is a momentous moment, as the tradition is enlarged and adapted. All are now welcome, and the calling of Christians defined in a new way. There will be more argument (see Paul summoned to account in Acts 15, and see also Galatians 2!), but the points are made v12 “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” and then v17f “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” 18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” [do they all have the same enthusiasm?]

This is an important piece of the history of the church – but not only of the first generation. The pattern repeats: as people grow comfortable in faith, they lose purpose. Living in an unbelieving world, they find it easier to put up barriers and keep to themselves than to preach the gospel and take the consequences.

Sometimes Christians will literally hide; but more often they will just develop traditions that take a long time to learn – their language and culture will become different, so that outsiders can be easily spotted and made to feel uncomfortable. They prefer their own ways to those of most other people, even when there is no religious or moral significance to them. – It has happened in the Church in my lifetime. Music, language, culture – all different from outsiders, a barrier to our sharing God’s goodness, but a barrier we are comfortable with, and unwilling to question.

Peter really stirred up the Jewish Christians, and if he won that day, it was not an argument that would go away – although the side against mission, and the recognition of new believers, never won.

There are churches today who prefer to stick to what they know and are comfortable with, even though they know that tradition will never communicate the gospel to people outside who need to know. Are they Christian? Let us rather ask ourselves, do we rejoice to see Cornelius and his family come to faith? What adjustments do we need to make to see the same today in the place we prefer to worship?

Commanded to love

It is funny how easily we avoid some of the most important bits of the gospel. In [John 13:31-34](#) Jesus commands his followers to love as he loves. Wonderful! We are to be loved, understood and forgiven – but how easily we forget that we must (yes, must) love, understand and forgive.

CS Lewis usefully made the point that if you try to love someone you don’t like, the best thing is to ask yourself what you would do if you did like them, and see if you can do that. Sadly, we are good at making it difficult. The linked passage from [Acts 11:1-18](#) helps explain. Peter had to face up to great barriers in going to a Gentile (the centurion Cornelius), baptising the family, and staying there. He has some explaining to do to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem – and the issue will come back.

Not an issue for us without a background in Jewish faith? But it is. Every Church sets up barriers to belonging to the core group. Even when newcomers are welcomed at the door, there are so many things to learn – a new set of words, a unique style of music, strange activities, – we could go on. Not that we are nasty about it, or even that we understand what it is like for newcomers very often. But this is a strange way to love the hesitant, or even the needy and hurting. We need our Christian culture to guide us, and we need to sit lightly to it to love those outside the present group.

We're stuck. We can't say, "I wish Jesus hadn't commanded us to love", because we would lose so much that is wonderful. But to accept the command and try to practise it, is difficult!

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 21.10, 22 – 22.5 or Acts 16. 9-15; John 14. 23-29 or John 5. 1-9

It's so good!

What will heaven be like? John's vision (today we read [Revelation 21:10 and 21:22 – 22:5](#)) has some interesting things, which ring true. We read of the centering of everything on God, Father and Son, and the way they provide light. Although strange at first, it is something significant. It is the light of God that has shown us the way, and will do so in future. It is light that makes possible free movement, and comfort, and recognition of people and places. As we fumble in a power cut, and shiver in an eclipse, we enjoy a sunny day. How much more joyful the light of God, which is more than physical.

We sometimes speak of “security lights” – those annoying lamps with sensors to turn them on, usually not quite when you want them. In heaven, the illumination is effective; there is no need to shut the city gates (usually a night-time security measure). Similarly it is a good place, where there is no “bad behaviour” or attempt to deceive. There is, not just a negative safety, but a positive thriving.

The opening verses of chapter 22 speak of the river, recalling Ezekiel's vision ([Ezekiel 47:1-12](#)), bringing life to dry places. Here too the tree of life gives life and healing – for the goodness and holiness of God seems to be almost infectious. On earth we are used to the way viruses and evil spread. We sometimes forget that love, joy, hope and many Christian fruit are seen, and that witness will also spread on earth.

The reign that continues for ever is not one of conquest or colonisation, but the good order, transparent justice, and continuing healing of all in the city. It is no wonder that God is worshipped, and we are encouraged to join in, even in anticipation from where we are now.

Easter summary

Coming near the end of the Easter season, we might ask what we have learned. [John 14:23-29](#) tells us Jesus words “those who love me will keep my word” (keep my *commands* in other translations) which raises the question of why we would want to.

Jesus also claims “I do as the Father has commanded me” [John 14:31](#). There is a clue.

I think the Easter season gives us time to absorb two big ideas. The first is life beyond what is seen. Against the constant temptation to limit our interest to what we can see, what is available now, the Resurrection widens our horizons and greatly increases the scale of reality. Yes, we shall have to give an account of our use or abuse of all God's gifts – but just as we learn to look at God's gifts rather than our own abilities, so we grapple with eternity rather than 70 years life, more or less. The universe is bigger and better than we think.

The second big idea, not denying that the Resurrection of Jesus has all sorts of things to say to us, is simply: “Jesus was right!”. God endorses, in the strongest way possible, his teaching, his life, his sacrificial death. At all the points where we might have wondered “Is that the right way?”, “Is God

really like that?” or just “You must be joking!”, God says again “[This is my Son, listen to him](#)“, as he had at the Transfiguration, and in part at Jesus baptism ([Mark 1:11](#), [Luke 3:22](#), quoting [Psalm 2:7](#)). Jesus spells it out to Phillip, when asked “[Show us the Father](#)“, he says in effect, “I have” – and in the Resurrection, the Father agrees.

Of course, that is not the end of the story. We shall have to learn to live with it, and with the Holy Spirit (watch this space . . .). It will take much of the rest of the (Church) year to look at details and specifics, but Easter has set the scene: Life is bigger and has more potential than you thought, and Jesus is right!

Re: action

Rogation Sunday is about prayer – the name comes from the Latin word for “ask” – and may have the danger of allowing us to give in to the temptation to do nothing practical. In John 5:1-9, we read of a pool in Jerusalem where the sick came to be healed.

Jesus finds there a man who has been there, in his role as an invalid, a long time. He asks a key question (verse 6) “Do you want to get well?”. The answer evades the question. The excuse has been well rehearsed, so Jesus confronts the issue: “Get up . . .”

Will he? Has he the faith? Can he face the world as a fit man? Isn’t it all rather comfortable around the pool with old friends?

He walks.

The simple point is also made in Acts 16:15. Once Lydia has been baptised in Philippi, she invites Paul and his friends to stay with her. The hospitality is not equal to the New Life brought by the gospel, but it is a practical and resolute response. [In today’s alternative gospel, Jesus says “Whoever loves me will obey my teaching . . .” John 14:23, bringing the same lesson] All these passages tell us that faith leads to action. Sometimes from fear, perhaps belief in judgement, now and hereafter, but Jesus quotes the greater and stronger motivation: to get it right, to avoid pain and spread good and glory, not only for ourselves but also for those we love.

Rogation Sunday is a good reminder to pray, and perhaps to pray for food and material things we so often take for granted. But let’s remember that prayer, and Christian life, is not opting out of action.

The man at the pool of Bethzatha knew he could not heal himself – that needed the power of God, as we do. But he discovered that he needed to do something, to co-operate. If we rejoice in the grace of God, which saves us, we must also be prepared for action. We have to remember that the action our faith requires must always take first priority.

Seventh Sunday of Easter.

Revelation 22. 12-14, 16-17, 20-21 or Acts 16. 16-34; John 17. 20-26

The Importance of Heaven

After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to various groups of people, then after 40 days, ascended back into heaven. We celebrated that last Thursday, and today read of heaven in [Revelation 22:12-21](#). (I prefer not to omit some verses – see later). People have some funny ideas about heaven. I can't remember anything said in scripture about family reunions, about endless rest, furry animals, golf, or styles of music.

What is said describes a beautiful and safe place; safe partly because among those excluded are those who would cause harm or bring deceit. Revelation 22:14 "Happy are those who wash their robes clean and so have the right to eat the fruit from the tree of life and to go through the gates into the city. 15 But outside the city are the perverts and those who practice magic, the immoral and the murderers, those who worship idols and those who are liars both in words and deeds."

That helps to make sense of the story of Paul in Philippi, [Acts 16:16-34](#). He delivers a slave girl from an evil spirit, but is persecuted for her owners loss of income – with lies, and official malpractice. He wins through, with the power of the Holy Spirit bringing faith to the jailer and his family – but the division which will be made in heaven is already developing. That division is NOT between "good" and "bad" people, – the key is not "performance", but the acceptance of forgiveness. Verse 14 "Happy are those who wash their robes clean and so have the right to eat the fruit from the tree of life and to go through the gates into the city. " Indeed, even as Revelation 22 tells us of heaven and those left out, it urges verse 17 Come! Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it.

The question is not only: "Do we want it?" (important though that is), but also do we want to share something so important, wonderful – and free? If so, we not only find ourselves praying for the gifts, fruit and power of the Holy Spirit to direct our Mission, but we also see why this is a time to think about Vocation. Vocation is not about bullying people into being ordained. It is about what God calls us to do, or put it another way, how we use the gifts he gives us. Some are leaders & organisers, some teachers, others are good with people, others can lead them to faith . . . There are many different gifts, but we need them all. Do you know yours, and help others to discover theirs? Have you spotted people who should be encouraged to take particular responsibilities in the Christian family? (If not, why not?)

"Come, whoever is thirsty." The gates of heaven are still open to us for a time. Now is the moment to repent, accept forgiveness, and work through what that means. I find it ironic that as we read vv18,19, warnings against adding or taking away from the book, it is suggested we leave out v18,19 – the warnings themselves, and v15, about the excluded. But until Jesus comes again, there is the opportunity to join those qualified to enter and eat the fruit of the tree of life. – Unless you know something more important to be thinking about today?

Unity -?

Jesus prays “not only on behalf of these (in the first century), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (the Christians of today) that they many all be one.” John 17:20

This should be popular. Toleration is the great secular virtue. - or is it? There are always those “beyond the pale”. It may be paedophiles, teenagers with knives, drug dealers . .

Zero tolerance policing is popular. . . . There is a myth that while we tolerate people, there are others: they are not like us, but aliens to be locked away.

Have Christians anything to offer? Yes. Jesus shows, not toleration, but the love of God to all people – including “others”: tax collectors, prostitutes, the demon possessed. His Church, in the first century and hopefully the twenty-first, welcomes all, with no “entry exam”. We are to welcome all sorts – Yes

Does this mean “anything goes”, we have no standards. No. How? We might take an example:

Two politicians visited a hospital, were shown round at length, and finally one commented: “This is a terrible place, full of sick and dying people!”. The other saw it differently: “This is wonderful, the work is amazing, the staff dedicated, the healing inspiring.”

We need to think of the Church as a hospital. It attracts those who need healing (which might explain some of the problems we have with it!). But don’t forget that you, like me, are sick and need treatment. Which is just as well, for a hospital has no place for those who don’t want any treatment. We belong in the Church, with all the other disabled.

Or, looking to the New Testament, we might think of Peter and Judas. Both failed Jesus badly. Peter repented, coming back to Jesus way of living and thinking. It was difficult (the three time denial, and triple question on the beach after the Resurrection), and costly. Judas will not go Jesus way, but his own – into darkness.

Jesus prays for unity – not for the world, where though we work for peace, wars will only cease at the end of time, when all recognise the King. For now, we struggle to love those who try to live in obedience to our Lord, and to be at peace with them. But a lot of our difficulty is allowing that the other patients in the hospital are just as sick as we are ourselves!

Excuses for this Booklet:

Why yet another collection of comments on the Revised Common Lectionary? There are better scholars, more skilled preachers, and professionally produced productions. But there are some people who know my style (of humour, as well as exposition), some worship leaders and others looking for reflections to read for their congregations, the housebound, and not least those who hesitate to spend money and may welcome a free offering. If nothing else, it keeps a retired cleric out of mischief!

If you enjoy this collection, do get in touch and let me know

(e-mail “andrewknight@phonecoop.coop”).

If there are further collections, should they be in the same form, or is there anything missing, or a possible improvement? Please read the Biblical text that is being reflected on, as well as the reflection – that is the point, and without it the comment is empty. There is a note at the front that this work is licensed under the Creative Commons scheme – meaning that you are welcome to copy and share it, read it on your own or for others, and adapt it without charge. You are not allowed to sell it, or pass it off as your own, however!

Of course the mistakes are my own, but I would like to thank those who have helped me to learn and preach, including congregations in several places, and the College of Preachers MTh course.

INDEX

1 Corinthians 15. 19-26	2	John 20. 19-31	7
Acts 10. 34-43	2	John 21. 1-19	10
Acts 11:1-18	14-15	Journey's End – and God's victory	11
Acts 16. 16-34	19	Just Saul?	9
Acts 5:37-42	6	Life, Safety, and Service	11
Acts 9:36-43	11-12	Look at Them	6
Acts 9. 1-6, [7-20]	9	Luke 24. 1-12	3
All Change!	3	Messiah and Good Shepherd?	12
Can we go back now?	10	Music, and dangerous things.	8
Commanded to love	15	Outsiders	14
Doubt Properly	7	Re: action	18
Easter 2	5-7	Revelation 1. 4-8	5
Easter 3	8-10	Revelation 5. 11-14	8
Easter 4	11-13	Revelation 7. 9-17	11
Easter 5	14-16	Revelation 21. 1-6	14
Easter summary	17	Revelation 22. 12-21	19
Easter Sunday	2-3	Telling the story	2
Heaven is . .	14	The Importance of Heaven	19
It's a Revelation!	5	Unity -?	20
It's so good!	17	Why Resurrection?	2
John 10. 22-30	12-13		
John 13. 31-35	15-16		
John 17. 20-26	20		