

## **Holy Week Compline Talks 2015**

Tuesday 31 March Prof John Morris

### **The Conflict of Doubt**

So far this Lent we have followed the various conflicts of Jesus's ministry starting with the family and disciples, then his origin in Galilee, Peter's conflict of fear and denial, then the conflicts of the trial before Pilate, and last night we looked at the conflicts that continued during his crucifixion on the cross. Tonight we move to a conflict that occurred after the resurrection – the conflict of doubt. This is surely part of the human condition and I wonder if there has ever been a person who at some time has not had doubts about what they believe?

My own training in science as a medic has always insisted that I ask questions, doubt easy explanations, ask for evidence, just like "doubting Thomas"

No surprise, therefore, that after as unprecedented an event as the resurrection of Jesus, there was considerable doubt. As usual we will compare what is said in the four gospels.

Matthew's account actually has no conflict of doubt; he just reports the angel rolling away the stone and telling the two Marys "he has been raised and is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him" and they hurried away in awe and great joy and ran to tell the disciples. No doubts there! However, doubts do appear right at the very end when the eleven make their way to a mountain in Galilee where they met Jesus "When they saw him they fell prostrate before him, though some were doubtful" at which point Jesus gives them their commission and ends with the assurance to us all "I am with you always, to the end of time'.

However, if we turn to the earlier Mark's gospel, which Matthew usually follows, here there is doubt and the whole account is rather different and some considerably longer. The Marys (here with Salome) go to the tomb; the great stone has been rolled away and it is a youth in white who tells them not to fear, but to tell his disciples and Peter "He is going before you into Galilee" They ran away, beside themselves with terror. Then "They said nothing to anybody, for they were afraid"

At this point the most ancient versions end and Mark, Matthew, Luke, John would present a gradually developing story; in other versions Mark continues after "they said nothing to anyone" with the contradictory statement "and they delivered all these instructions briefly to Peter and his companions"; these versions continue then "Mary of Magdala .. went and carried the news to his mourning and sorrowful followers, but when they were told that he was alive and that she had seen him they did not believe it." More doubt  
Next, Mark records Jesus appearance "in a different guise to two of them as they are walking. these also went and took the news to the others, but again no one believed them.

Luke also starts by stressing the lack of belief of the apostles when told by the women what they had been told (in this case by 2 men in dazzling garments), and adds "But the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe them." We must remember, in addition, that at the time women could not give witness in a court of law. Luke then has a much longer version of Jesus appearance on the road to Emmaus, in which the two apostles clearly did not believe the story of the resurrection "and now some women of our company have astounded us; they failed to find his body and returned with a story that they had seen a vision of angels who told them he was alive. Some of us also went, but saw nothing" It was only in the breaking of the bread that they recognise Jesus and "without a moment's delay set out and return to Jerusalem" where they found the apostles together and tell them the story, at which point Jesus himself appears and explains the scriptures and gives them their commission.

John's gospel as usual gives a substantially different account from that of the synoptics, but we have already seen that the tradition John records fits better with the timing of the events of the passion. In John, Mary of Magdala simply finds the stone removed and runs to Peter and the beloved disciple saying "They taken the Lord out of his tomb" (no mention of any angels) and it is Peter and the disciple who run to the tomb and enter, and the John says "the disciple saw and believed; until then they had not understood the scriptures which showed that he must rise from the dead." At which point John simply makes the astonishing statement "So the disciples went home again ... ..!" no record of any surprise or emotion! John continues with Mary's weeping encounter with someone she originally thinks is the gardener, but recognizes Jesus' voice and is told to "go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father." Later that day, Jesus appears in the locked room in which the disciples are hiding for fear and gives them their commission, but Thomas is not with them. So we come to "doubting Thomas" – tonight's personality. When they tell Thomas he not unreasonably asks for some evidence "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will NOT believe it". One week later of course when they were all together in a locked room, Jesus again appears and offers Thomas the chance to experience the evidence he asks for at which Thomas simply bursts out "My Lord and my God!" Jesus then says something very important for us in Lent 2015, separated by nearly 2000 years and a totally different set of experiences from a group of Galilean fishermen "Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith"

And those doubts persist today, with those who have spent their entire lives considering the evidence concluding either with NT Wright, Bishop of Durham, that "the resurrection of Jesus was an historical event", or with David Strauss that "never has an incredible fact been worse attested"

Resurrection does not form an important part in any earlier religion; Jesus' resurrection appears to have come as a complete surprise to the women and disciples and, indeed, preparing the disciples for it forms a negligible proportion of the gospel accounts of Jesus teaching, which is much more concerned with preparation for the coming Kingdom of God. However Paul leaves his readers in no doubt "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" though when he preached in Athens his educated listeners simply poked fun at his "babbling" – a view with which many today would doubtless concur.

So how did this terrified small group of disciples go from the conflict of doubt to become a band of ecstatic spiritual warriors who openly proclaimed the message of the Gospel with charismatic potency to all who would listen, including the authorities? Today we are all too aware of the sudden changes of psychology that allow young men and women to rush off to join ISIS.

Somehow, by what we call the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples felt increasingly sure that Jesus was with them. The Holy Spirit that gave them the strength to carry on with their mission was the proof for them, *and can be for us*, that Jesus had risen from the dead. As Paul Winter puts it at the end of his book "On the Trial of Jesus" "Jesus is rising again, today and tomorrow, in the hearts of people who love him and feel he is near". That must be our Easter message and proclamation.