Sermon for First Sunday after Easter RCL Year B

Readings: Acts 4:32-37; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

It’s a pity that John chapter 20 is not the first page in the New Testament. Obviously, that is impossible, because we need to hear the preceding story to make sense of the Resurrection. Yet what we read in John 20 is as significant as the first page of Genesis. In many respects, John 20 is the equivalent in the New Testament of that Old Testament passage.

For in the story of the Upper Room on Easter Sunday we are witnessing the birth of a new creation. Nothing will ever be the same again. Creation will never be the same again. Humanity will never be the same again. The resurrection has changed everything.

In Genesis chapter 1, God breathed into the nostrils of the man of clay he had made and man became a living, spiritual being. In John 20 Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his disciples and they come alive in a way that no other people had ever been alive before in a world that was never going to be the same again.

St. Paul understands the way in which everything has changed because of Christ’s resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 he writes, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” And in Romans 8 he says that this new life encompasses the whole world: “There was hope that one day creation itself would be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

In days gone by, the prophets had been inspired by the Spirit of God, as all artists and poets are touched by that living spirit, but now for the first time, God was going to dwell with people on a permanent basis. Now he would write his name upon our hearts, and so fulfil the promise made to Jeremiah that he would establish a new covenant with his people. This indwelling of the Spirit was now possible, because for the first time the true and full nature of the Holy Spirit had been revealed to the world. The true nature of the Spirit of God cannot be understood without knowing Christ, and Christ crucified and risen.

2

The very first Christians immediately understood that life had changed for ever and they began to try to live in a new way. This is what we see them trying to do in Acts 4:32-37. They sold what they possessed and shared it out according to need. This never became the way all Christians had to live everywhere in the world even during New Testament times, but it was a genuine attempt to try and express how they felt about their new life in Christ.

In selling all their possessions they were demonstrating a new confidence in the power of God. If God could raise Jesus up from death, he could surely provide for their needs without the worry of storing up treasures on earth. The resurrection had changed their relationship with God and also with the world: they had greater confidence than ever before.

No longer did they just concern themselves with their own family, or even their own nation; nor did people get according to their greed, but according to their need. They understood that through the resurrection their relationship to other believers had changed forever too. They belonged to a new family, to a new nation.

Finally, they also sold their land to give that money to the Church. This is the most significant act of all. These first Christians in Jerusalem were Jews and they were selling their birth right – the Promised Land. Since the resurrection the land was no longer vital, they no longer believed in a Promised Land in the literal, geographic sense. They now belonged to a Kingdom that knew no borders. They would have agreed with what John Wesley said many years later that, “All the world is my parish.”

When Barnabas **sold** his land in the New Testament it is as significant as when Jeremiah **bought** land in the Old Testament. Jeremiah *bought* land to demonstrate that the people would return to the Promised Land after the Exile. Barnabas *sold* land in order to prove that he now possessed the Promised Land, which Jesus called the kingdom of heaven. After the resurrection everything had changed and the first Christians knew it.

3

After the initial euphoria in Jerusalem in Acts 4:32-37, when we come to the First Letter of John, time has moved on. The euphoria has died down a little, and now is the time for considered reflection. The Letter of John shows the Church trying to make sense of the resurrection experience after the Church has been around for a few years and seen that Christians still make mistakes, sometimes act sinfully, and sometimes the evil world seems to defeat even the most faithful Christians.

They do not falter in their belief that they have found eternal life through Christ. They do not hesitate to share the good news with others. But they have to face up to the failings of the Church and the challenge of the world. John realises that the new creation of the Upper Room does not mean that the old has ceased to exist, but rather there are now two universes existing side by side.

John knows that Christians are called to live in this world, but to no longer be conformed to it and by it. As Paul says, Christians are now citizens of heaven, and that must take precedence over being citizens of Rome. It is not that this world no longer exists, or no longer matters, but that living in this world has been transformed because we already belong to the next world, where our life is hidden with God.

In the First Letter of John Christians are reminded that they must live in the light, rather than the darkness. Christians have a choice; they can live according to the next world, according to their heavenly citizenship, or they can continue to live according to the darkness of this world, their earthly, unreformed citizenship. But if they live in darkness, they will not have fellowship with Christ.

Yet Christians are told not to panic about their sins. Living in the light with Christ does not mean they can expect to live totally free from sin. If you try to fool yourself into thinking you can live free from sin, you are denying the Gospel, because the Gospel is about how Christ saves us from our sin. It was in his days as a Pharisee that Paul thought himself “blameless”.

As a Christian, Paul no longer considered himself “blameless”; he considered himself forgiven. The resurrection of Christ has made all things new, but that does not mean we can expect to be totally free from sin in this life. It does not mean that if we sin, we do not truly believe. What the Gospel means is that by truthfully confessing our sins to God we are proclaiming the Gospel, because we are showing that we trust what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It will continue to be a struggle for us to live in the light of the Gospel, but because of our faith in Christ, our place in the kingdom of heaven is secure.

So the believer now lives in two universes. A Christian looks like other people and in some respects will live like one, whatever heroic efforts he makes like those first believers in Jerusalem. A Christian will also sometimes sin like other people. So how is this new world of faith any different to the old world of unbelief? How has the resurrection changed the world if we still sin?

It is different because we know Christ has overcome this world and has dealt with our sins. We are secure in the kingdom of God, but not by pretending we do not sin, nor by simply adopting a world-renouncing, capitalist-condemning life style like those in Jerusalem, but by trusting in Jesus Christ, in the power of his crucifixion and his resurrection. When we believe that, we do indeed live in a whole new world and things can never quite be the same again.

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