

FSermon – Fr. John Fitzmaurice

Texts:

NT Reading 1: *Acts 3.12-19*
NT Reading 2: *1John 3.1-7.*
Gospel: *Luke 24.36b-48*

Date: **14 April 2024**
Liturgical Year: **Easter 3 Year B**
Where: **Worcester Cathedral**

Digestion and Resurrection

+ May I speak in the name of the living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It will be 39 years ago next September when my mother took a now much prized photograph of me. I was standing on the pier at Dun Laoghaire, the ferry port just south of Dublin. I was considerably thinner than I am now, and my worldly goods were contained in a medium sized rucksack and two smallish cardboard boxes, balanced on a somewhat rickety luggage trolley. I was making the journey to London not, as so many Irish people have done in the past out of economic necessity, but to begin a four-year course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. The focus of my studies at the Guildhall was the field of Early Music, a slippery term at the best of times, but one that generally refers to music written from the Medieval period to the Early-Classical, from the 15th to the 18th centuries.

The mid-1980s was a fascinating time to be involved in this area of music-making. Early Music and its enthusiasts were moving from the somewhat eccentric fringes of musical life into the mainstream. Record companies were becoming interested - some of you might even remember Christopher Hogwood's renowned recording of Handel's Messiah in 1984, which was generally the moment that most people felt the Early Music movement went mainstream.

The goal of the Early Music movement, broadly speaking, was to perform historic music as authentically as possible – a process not dissimilar to cleaning an Old Master painting. To achieve this, instruments were built that were exact replicas of the ones that would have played the music originally, using the same tuning systems and pitch (yes, all this was different in the 17 and 18 centuries!), and historic treatises were pored over to better understand and replicate historic playing techniques. Pieces that hadn't been played for 300-400 years were unearthed from libraries, played, and in some cases returned to the libraries for another 400 years!

However soon a significant problem emerged - practitioners began to realise that complete authenticity was an unachievable goal (and we would never know if we achieved it, if we ever did!). They realised that you can't simply pretend that the intervening 300-400 years didn't exist - when we listen to or play Handel now, we do so with ears that, for better or worse, have heard Brahms, Wagner and the Beatles – it can't be otherwise, but it wasn't the case originally. Thus within the Early Music movement the focus moved from the search for complete authenticity towards Historically Informed Performance (and the pleasing acronym HIP) that recognised that complete authenticity was not possible, but that Historically Informed Performance gave an energy and freshness to the music that was exhilarating.

We have the same problem when it comes to the interpretation of scripture. Much as we might like to, we cannot hear scripture the same way that a Middle Eastern or Mediterranean Christians in the second century might have heard it. Now this doesn't make scripture any less authoritative, but it does make the interpretative task more challenging. We cannot pretend that the intervening 2,000 years or so haven't happened, or that our search for meaning in the biblical text is not coloured by what has happened during those two millennia. One of the key events in this period was the advent of scientific rationalism in the 18th century. I'm not knocking this - the world has been incredibly blessed by scientific rationalism, but it does present an interpretative challenge for sacred texts that were written in an age when it was not known as an interpretive approach, not least in its conflation of truth with fact, and this problem is particularly acute when we approach the complex language and symbolism surrounding the Resurrection narratives.

Which brings me to the piece of broiled fish we heard about in our gospel reading (paralleling the story of Jesus making his disciples breakfast on the beach in St. John's gospel). A literalist-rationalist approach would argue that for Jesus to eat the fish he needed and body and a digestive system capable of so doing, but this leads us more towards and understanding of the Easter event as resuscitation rather than Resurrection. But a resuscitated body couldn't do some of the things the disciples recorded Jesus doing after his resurrection like suddenly appearing (sometimes in locked rooms) and then disappearing. So maybe there is some other truth at play here?

This passage follows on directly from the story of the Road to Emmaus, where Jesus' disciples recognised him in the breaking of the bread. In this passage he is recognised in the sharing of a piece of fish. Now of course sharing bread and fish have resonances to events earlier in the Gospel, not least the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000 – prefigurings of the coming kingdom of God. This imagery and its

resonance would have been familiar to the early church in a way that discussions about the physiology of digestion wouldn't have been.

Now before those of you with your thumbs hovering over the speed dial to the bishop press it, let me affirm my belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But in so doing let me reject the dualism between the body and the spirit that is one of those accretions that has taken place in the intervening 2,000 years (largely through the influence of the philosopher Descartes) and which stands between the writers of scripture and us as contemporary interpreters. As human beings we are ultimately one organism, and Jesus too was one organism - his divinity and his humanity were inseparable - likewise our spirits and our bodies are not split, as indeed contemporary neuropsychology is now beginning to demonstrate. I believe the Resurrection to be a profoundly somatic experience in which body and spirit are utterly unified. It is this that I believe St. Paul is referring to when he somewhat confusingly refers to the 'spiritual body'

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable..... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ¹ Corinthians 15:42,44-45

But I wonder if all this 'what did he do with the fish?' causes us to focus on the wrong thing. The second half of today's gospel reading tells us Jesus said....

These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.... Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures'.

He goes on to say:

"Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

The key word in all of this is, as is so often the case, '...and...'. The fullness of the Resurrection, the fullness of the Kingdom is to be understood by BOTH Jesus' resurrection from dead after three days, AND the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness to all nations. Maybe Jesus is telling us that the

Resurrection is as much about the latter as it is the former, or at least you can't have one without the other.

And he ends with a challenge:

You are witnesses of these things.

This is not just a simple philosophical or theological conundrum, but rather a call to action. What does it mean for us individually and corporately as the community of faith to be called to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. How utterly transformative might that be for us as individuals, for our communities, our society, and indeed our world!

So we move from a digestive dilemma to an encounter that is utterly transformative in which the disciples, and indeed our own, self-understanding and sense of life's purpose is revolutionised, and in so doing we discover one of the other great truths of the Resurrection we proclaim, that it is not just simply about the transformation of Jesus, but about our utter transformation too.