

The Great Fifty Days - from Easter to Pentecost

Easter is over, but chocolate eggs are still around! We have small chocolate eggs in little bonbon dishes scattered around the house. You will be amazed how good it is for us, developing strength character and control of will power! I am living testimony of this! I have not gained weight nor have I lost any!

A little three year old boy was visiting us last Sunday. As he took off his jacket and shoes and bounded into the house, there before him he discovered a bonbon dishes with chocolate eggs, and course wanted **some** right away. He then ran around the house

and discovered several other bonbon dishes and thought we had set up an Easter egg hunt for him! As his parents went about the task of explaining complex social rules of do's and don'ts which only parents of little children know how to do, Narola and I offered up a silent prayer of thanks, that ignorance of dealing with little children, is indeed bliss!

The energy with which the three-year old boy ran through the house with increasing glee each time he spotted a bonbon dish with chocolate easter eggs, brought back memories from a bygone childhood, and the energy spent in celebrating Easter. In some places, preparations for Easter started with Lent, which included preparing meats (or

fattening the pig!), selecting new clothes to wear to Church on Easter morning, and several other activities.

The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, was an event, unique in human history. The remaining eleven Apostles and many thousands of disciples and followers of Christ awoke to the realisation, ancient prophecy had come true before their very own eyes! The Jews believed, no one could see God and live¹, yet eleven men and many thousands men and women had indeed seen God, and they were **living** testimony!

They had met with, and talked with, and ate with God in the person of His Son, living

¹ Exodus 33:20 - Moses' conversation with God on Mount Sinai, where He asked God, *Please let me see your Glory*, to which God replied, *No one can see me and live to tell the tale*

among them! They were part of an event in all human history which was so very special, like the three year old little boy, they could not contain their excitement. Everything they saw and touched, places they visited, all reminded them of their time with Jesus.

Luke noted this excitement: after Jesus' ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem ***with GREAT joy*** and were ***continually*** in the temple, praising God!²

As they recollected and remembered everything Jesus said and instructed them, two directives stood out: "*Whenever you do this (i.e. break bread), do it in remembrance of me!*"³" at the last passover dinner, and at

² Luke 24:53

³ Luke 22:19

His Baptism, to John the Baptist, who at first was reluctant, Jesus said, *“Do it! God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this my baptism⁴.”*

Celebrating the **NEW** passover meal (Holy Communion to us) and identifying with God’s work of bringing people and all things together through Baptism, both were significant and important parts of celebrating Easter, a freedom from prosaic, uninspiring Jewish worship rituals, with the bounding energy of delightful celebration.

It is not fair to blame the Victorians for everything, but we can hold them responsible for dumbing down the life and

⁴ Matthew 3:15

practice of being a Christian. The rapid increase in books and literature presented a real danger to The Book, The Bible, which is central to the Christian faith and living the Christian life.

Despite the valiant efforts of John Keble, Matthew Arnold and Gerald Hopkins to revive the sanctity and Holiness of God, the publication of *The Life of Christ*, for example, a translation from German by a woman writing under the pen name of George Eliot, resulted in increasing numbers of Christians finding it difficult to believe in Jesus Christ as a historical reality.

The Bible was being transformed from a divine truth, to a mere literary text.

Emily Dickinson⁵ summed up the social mood during the second half of the 1800s, *They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse*⁶.

The energy with which Easter was celebrated, starting with Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, followed by the very happy, family ritual of the Passover celebration, then the noisy and painful events of Good Friday and finally waking up to joyous greetings on Easter Sunday morning, during the Victoria era, all dissipated into sombre and almost silent rituals, lacking any form of celebration and spontaneous joy.

⁵ American poet (1830 - 1886)

⁶ Emily Dickinson, Letter to Mrs. J. G. Holland (Spring 1878).

Should we, can we recover from this Victorian legacy and find ways to celebrate more joyously, the one single event around which gives meaning to our Christian faith?

I think we can, perhaps not to the extent of becoming boisterous and disorderly, but certainly as celebratory as birth and birthdays, and marriage and anniversaries.

Over the next three Sundays leading to Ascension Sunday at the end of this month, we shall explore what it might take for us to recover some of the excitement of Easter.

We can learn to do this, from the experience of the Apostles, and from the teachings of Jesus Himself.

We have four lessons to take away from the post-resurrection accounts and narratives.

1. Take time to appreciate God's gift of Jesus' resurrection. This, once-in-human-history event, overturns, invalidates the control of death over us. No longer should we entertain thoughts like the Egyptians, to plan and prepare for life hereafter, with tombs filled with food and clothing and wealth. Life here and now, no longer ends in death; physical death leads to eternal life for those who believe in God's gift of The Resurrection. The Apostles and the disciples took time to understand the significance of the Resurrection, but once they did, their lives were not the same.

2. Recover a sense of awe, reverential respect and wonder for God's gift of the resurrection. At the tomb, in the haze of the light of dawn, when Mary of Magdalene realised Jesus was standing before her and addressing her, she could only utter a whispered cry, incredulous in tone, *Teacher?!⁷*

Thomas said, *I will not believe the person you are talking about is the Jesus we knew, until I have seen and touched the nail-wounds in His hands and the spear wound in His side.* When he does meet Jesus eight days later and He offers him His hands and his side for Thomas to touch and believe, Thomas could barely utter a whispered cry, *My Lord and my*

⁷ John 20:16

*God!*⁸ Several paintings by the grand masters, including one by Caravaggio, show Thomas touching Jesus' hands and side, but this is wrong! Thomas never touched Jesus' wounds despite his heroic claim he would. Jesus invites Thomas to touch His wounds, but Jesus' response tells us he never did, *Have you believed because you have **seen** me? Blessed are those who have not **seen**, and yet believe!*⁹

Recover a sense of awe, reverential respect and wonder for God's gift of the resurrection.

3. Doubt and disbelief are part of life.
Elections or no elections, we are

⁸ John 20:24-29

⁹ John 20:29

bombarded and buffeted with news, views and opinions, not to mention *false or fake news*. Last year the Oxford Dictionary gave us the word, ***Post Truth*** which refers to allowing our emotions and personal beliefs to shape the opinion of others, instead of using objective facts; there seems to be lot of emotional outbursts and personal beliefs, and not objective facts, being spoken, printed and broadcast.

Under these conditions, doubt, suspicion and confusion is natural.

How we deal with our doubts and disbelief is important. Peter returned to Galilee apparently disillusioned, wondering whether his time with Jesus

was a dream. Returning from a fruitless night of fishing, he hears Jesus' greeting and leaves everything to be with Him.¹⁰

When faced with doubt, uncertainty, and confusion, the best place to be is in the company of Truth, which for us, in this day and age, is God's infallible Word.

4. Finally, we have at our disposal, the same resource the Apostles and the Disciples enjoyed. Between resurrection and ascension Jesus taught them the whole/complete Word of God, and answered all their questions. We have in our possession, this very same resource, the whole, the complete Word of God. Many of us view the Word of God, the

¹⁰ John 21

Bible, as a record of the past. We shall see in the book of Acts, however, that this time in human history called the *age of the Church*, which was initiated after the resurrection of Christ, He **continues** to be at work, building His Church.

Death is no longer a barrier separating us from God, Jesus is at work right now in His world, carrying out, directing and mediating God's divine program of restoring us with Him.

Over the next two weeks, we shall explore two test-runs of the Apostles' faith before Pentecost, and God's release of the Holy Spirit. The first test of their faith was the physical **separation** from Jesus after His resurrection - *are you ready to be*

commissioned to do what God wants done to restore His kingdom on earth, without my physical presence with you?

The second test of the Apostles' faith was **waiting**. They had no idea how long they would have to wait, nor what would happen when they would be *baptised with the Holy Spirit*.¹¹

In the meantime we have four things to do in preparation of what is to come.

1. Start by appreciating and accepting God's gift of Jesus' resurrection, that death is no longer a barrier, holding us back from an eternal relationship with God.

¹¹ Acts 1:5

2. Recover a sense of awe, a reverential respect and wonder for God's act of resurrection. He has done something which we could not have done, and in many ways, we do not deserve. Only God could have dealt with death through His Son, for which we should stand in awe and reverential respect.
3. Deal with doubt and disbelief by surrounding yourself with Truth, as found in the Word of God.
4. Comfort yourself with the knowledge that Jesus is at work building His Church and disregard what the press have to say about it.

In August, we shall have David and Claire-Lisse Judkins who are English missionaries in France and the incredible work they are involved in. You will, I hope, be truly encouraged that your faith is not in vain, as we listen how God is working through them among the people of Brive, in mid-west France, and to be challenged how we might do the same here.

As we journey through the fifty days between Resurrection Day and Pentecost, I pray you may find the explosive event which shocked and rocked the world on Resurrection Day, may lead into paths of joyous discovery.

And I pray you discover the real Christ as you break bread, whether you slice it, cut it or tear it apart!

AMEN.