

20140420EasterSunday

Maybe I'm strange but I like seaside resorts during the off-seasons, when their tackiness and kitsch-ness is open to be seen without the hoards of happy holidaymakers enjoy themselves. I suspect it is that I like anticipating what will be and what was, rather than the present moment. For example nothing excites me more than the cacophony of a symphony orchestra tuning up. I know that shortly out of the cacophony of sound, order will be restored and beautiful music will drift into my ears and into my mind.

Arguably, the two most important days in the Christian calendar are the fourth Sunday of Advent and Holy Saturday because they are also days of anticipation - like waiting for that symphony orchestra to begin. On both these days, what is promised has not yet been revealed. Christians wait for birth and resurrection, knowing that they will surely come, but having little idea about what their precise form might take. The days are chock-full with anticipation, and yet not with fulfilment.

In one sense, the Church lives almost permanently on this cusp - waiting, hoping, longing, praying and anticipating - for the coming of the Christ. But at the same time, not really knowing if the Church will recognize Jesus when he does come. Yet here he is; it is now Easter. And now what?

While writing this sermon I had the Pistorius trial on the Radio and Gerrie Nel and Barry Le Roux were arguing over the position of a pair of jeans and a duvet on the floor of Oscar's house. Had they been moved? Photographs do not lie but one lawyer spoke about the error of parallax which, in the photograph made the jeans appear to be on top of the duvet. So perhaps photographs do lie.

Some years ago, the then newly appointed bishop of Durham took a calculated swipe at his predecessor, Dr David Jenkins, by saying that if cameras could have been present on the first Easter morning, photographic evidence of the resurrection would now be available. You may remember that it was David Jenkins who had been hounded by the press after being widely misquoted as stating that "the resurrection was just a conjuring trick with bones". When in fact what he had said was that the resurrection itself must be more than the said conjuring trick.

Setting that debate aside as one of the less glorious chapters in the history of our Anglican church, we can nonetheless pose an intriguing question about the resurrection event: what does it mean to talk about seeing Jesus after his resurrection? The question isn't as straightforward as it sounds. Remember, for example, that plenty of people witnessed Jesus preaching, and even performing miracles. But in one sense, they **saw** nothing, for as the Gospels continually point out, many people who could "see" were in fact quite, blind to what was really going on. And some people who were regarded as being pretty dim-witted by their peers turned out have a very clear vision and version of the events they saw.

The Gospels are full of amusing and playful parodies about sight and blindness. I mentioned in Lent that lovely statement by the man born blind that he didn't care whether the man who cured him was a prophet or not; all that mattered was that once he was blind but now he could see.

But underneath these playful occurrences is a more serious intention. The Gospels (clearly) reveal that there is no direct correlation between seeing and believing. Nowhere is this more true than in the resurrection stories, where the Gospel writers are careful to add that "some doubted" what they saw, even when the evidence was staring them in the face. It is almost as though the resurrection stories offer a coda to the Gospels. The graphic and stark visual impact of the crucifixion burns in the memory of the witnesses to Good Friday. But this sight is out-narrated by the resurrection, which entirely alters our visual perceptions and frames of reference. Suddenly, there are sights, sensations and experiences that cannot be contained in words, let alone captured on film.

"The camera never lies", so the saying goes. But the saying is wrong, for photographs, like paintings, do not reveal anything like the full or complete truth. Firstly, they reveal the partiality of the painter or photographer, who chose to frame one moment in still life, but not another. They chose to tell this story, but not that one. Yes, pictures do always tell a story - but even before the paint is dry or the negative developed, we have an interpretation of an event, which is always more than a clear re-telling or a carbon copy of the whole story.

The resurrection breaks all frames of reference, bursting our perceptual boundaries, leaving the Gospel writers with the unenviable task of trying to piece together shards of information that exceed any prevailing perceptions of reality. An appearance here, a disappearance there; a sighting then, but a vanishing now; one minute you can touch Jesus; the next, he seems like an apparition. So the Easter story is a simple story, really. It reminds us that not everyone who looks actually "sees" what is going on.

But for those who do see, it is like being born again as Zoe and Nomthandazo will be at the 9:30 service as they are baptised; as we all were when we were baptised and as we will remind ourselves as we renew our baptism vows, shortly. The resurrection of Jesus shows us that there is a very deep relationship between the womb and the tomb. Both are giving birth to something new in us, and in the world. It is not yet fully clear what this will all mean for the first Christians, but the early signs are promising. Jesus is alive; and we can now be born again.

So a camera on Easter morning would not be much use. Some would still doubt, and the photograph would still need an explanation, which would of course be create more arguments. But we can't leave things there, for the resurrection left its mark on the first witnesses. Once the disciples began to understand what they saw - and this took a while, - their whole perception of God and the world was utterly changed.

The resurrection caused the disciples to look backwards, like me at a seaside resort in winter looking back to a glorious summer. For the disciples it was looking back to where they saw things in the distant past with fresh eyes that now made sense of the present. And they could look to the future too, like I do as the symphony orchestra tunes up. For the disciples it was now knowing that seeing is not the same as believing. From now on, they would walk by faith, and not by sight.

In his poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland", Gerald Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit priest and poet, is writing about a steamship, *The Deutschland*, that ran aground about twenty-five miles off the English coast. His poem is dedicated to five Franciscans nuns who were fleeing persecution in Germany and died in that shipwreck. Towards the end of the poem Hopkins speaks of his hope that Christ will enter our lives. "*Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us.*" Hopkins understands and uses Easter as a verb rather than a noun. It is a reminder that Easter is something that happens to us. Easter is about action, about living, about transformation. Christ enters and Easters in us. He shares his risen life with us. As St Paul says, *It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Gal. 2:19-20)

So, let him Easter in you. Don't just look - **see** the risen Christ. And in so doing, make your journey from the womb and the empty tomb to be born again. And wait for the symphonic music of spheres to lead **you** to the glorious summertime in **your** life.

From numerous sources including *Darkness Yielding* a sermon, 'Seeing isn't believing' by Martyn Percy, the blog *Interrupting the Silence*