

Second Sunday after Easter 23 April 2017

[Acts 2: 14a, 22-32;](#) [Psalm 16;](#) [1 Peter 1: 3-9;](#) [John 20: 19-31](#) Vanderbilt

[Easter 2 A April 23 2017](#) Textweek

In the season of Easter, the fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost, we have an opportunity to try and understand our encounter with Easter; to ask for ourselves what does it mean and what is the reality of resurrection? In our Sunday readings, the Old Testament is set aside and replaced by readings from the book of Acts to give us the reflections of the early Church as a starting point; and perhaps, albeit unknowingly, this is one of the real clues to the Easter mystery, the setting aside of the Old Testament!

It is important for us to see the readings as a 'starting point' and not a definitive script that gives all the answers to that which we still seek to understand.

Two thousand years on from the 'first Easter' and we have evolved beyond the more primitive view of those first witnesses; we have access to many more reference points than did the early disciples and we've had time to reflect.

In that same two thousand year period the Church has sought to impose a fixed understanding of Easter and has resisted attempts to deepen and broaden its initial understanding in the light of growing wisdom and our evolving insights.

And so for us to discover the meaning of Easter in 2017, and to appreciate the meaning of Easter for ourselves it is helpful for us to free ourselves from the confines of the past and look afresh at what mystery is being revealed in that first Easter morning; to look afresh and ponder the meaning of a Formula-One Lola nose-cone appearing before the altar last Sunday.

And to free ourselves so that we can more fully seek the wisdom of the Scriptures, to look with wonder as the early Church looked, we must be discerning in what we read so that we are not automatically led down the garden path of a past tradition.

So let's begin with a brief critical appraisal of the readings to identify some of their short comings, and to more clearly see where they have been somewhat shrouded by, and so shaped by, worldviews and traditions that give a contextual distortion to the whole revelation of 'mystery'.

"Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say."

We can clearly see from this opening to Peter's address that this utterance and indeed the whole of Acts is written within a patriarchal framework, is a male dominated worldview and so at best is a one-sided appreciation of wisdom. Although quite normal in its day, we now appreciate that the female voice is a valued and necessary balancing voice; and it is with voices attuned and together that we are enabled to more fully appreciate a fuller understanding of humanity.

And the “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say” tells us that this was a teaching addressed to a particular grouping of people in a particular place; the Israelites.

When we are looking to the Scriptures for reference points we are always looking for a universal and eternal voice, not seeking to hear only for ourselves, and so we need to be mindful and discern if what Peter is saying belongs to its time and place or is a deeper and more universal wisdom being revealed.

The three references to King David in the text very much alert us to the fact that Peter is appealing to the tradition, seeking to link his encounter with Easter to the existing cornerstones of his faith. And that again might well distort the whole Easter mystery, for Christ was revealing to all what had not been revealed before.

Next comes the Psalm, and liturgically this is seen as bridge between the Old and the New Testament readings; that is not necessarily helpful, especially when we have no Old Testament reading and more especially when we are looking to explore something new.

However, again perhaps unknowingly, the Psalm does engage a more ‘right brain’ interest following the often ‘left brain’ first reading and so might still serve a useful purpose. I often think that a more contemporary piece of poetry would add so much more than the psalm to our liturgy, and the inclusions that Gabby provides in the service sheet very often bear that out.

Today Psalm 16 is chosen as Peter quotes from it (although a variant on the translation we have) in verses 25-28 of the first reading.

The second reading although once again in Peter’s name is most likely not written by Peter but rather written and declared as having the weight of, or authority, of Peter. And it is clearly to a different audience, this time it is gentiles not Israelites that are being addressed.

It displays some real understanding of the Easter Mystery, for the writer talks of an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”; and this takes the community beyond the Old Testament ‘inheritance’ that was envisaged as Jerusalem or Zion.

However, the writer remains within the framework of his existing faith-view and explains the Easter mystery as

“a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you... for a salvation ready to be revealed in the **last time.**”

And this understanding confines the revelation of Jesus to an Old Testament paradigm of a resurrection in the end times, or at the end of time; rather than the living reality that is the very essence of the Easter mystery.

And so to the gospel, and for bottle-fed Christians this a documentary extract from a day in the life of Jesus after Easter. However when we look at it more closely it is much more.

If we had never heard this, or maybe when we first heard it, surely the narrative begs the question, why Thomas?

Thomas has been used by the writer of the gospel as a literary device; the gospel writer is illuminating a point, not recording an event; and to more clearly see that we need only ask what else do we know about Thomas?

Most casual readers of the gospels probably know nothing more about Thomas, but the early hearers of the gospel, undistracted by social media, would readily know that Thomas is the only disciple named in the gospel reading from the last Sunday of Lent. And by naming him we know that Thomas was witness to the raising of Lazarus; with that knowledge we are being confounded by his disbelief in the resurrection.

Most probably the writer, and certainly the early Church sought to make the resurrection clear and simple, they were seeking to share the Easter mystery and the whole idea of resurrection and so they focussed on the physicality of the bodily resurrection in order to convey the truth Christ revealed.

We must remember that these early 'Christians' had never seen an episode of Star-Trek, they had no understanding of atomic physics, wave-particle duality, the dimensions of space-time nor any of the other reference points we might explore to explain the empty tomb; and so we have the testimony of Thomas and the reality of a wounded body to make clear to the primitive listeners that resurrection is a reality.

For us today, Thomas probably mirrors our own doubts in the reality of the Easter Mystery, but those doubts are not satisfactorily answered with the Thomas narrative; and nor should they be.

The revealed truth of the Easter Mystery is in the words, but is not mirrored in the explanation.

"Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe"
"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The resurrection so central to the Easter mystery is not about bodies coming out of graves

rather it is a 'reaching out with our hands, overcoming life's doubts and believing in the reality of blessing; as we heard in the second reading it is about

"a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ".

The Easter Mystery invites us into a new paradigm, we leave behind the Old Testament, we leave behind the pseudo-historical narration of a chosen few, and we leave behind the cultural norm of a life that is bounded by death, and rather than living with an arrow pointing to the grave, we live into a new reality that extends beyond the confines of time.

So will we continue the journey on the road we have already travelled, or will we contemplate driving a formula-one on a track we have never driven on before?