

Easter Sunday 080412 Iona Abbey

They were not expecting resurrection. He was gone, crucified, dead and buried, and no one was hanging around in case they met the same fate.

The women went to the tomb early in the morning with oils and ointments but only to tend to a battered corpse, some of the men hid in fear behind locked doors and others had already headed out of the city back to the security of home and family.

Fishermen headed back to their boats, carpenters to their tools, prodigal sons and daughters to their dishonoured parents. But back home things were not the same and could never be for they had been changed by their experiences.

The things he had shown them, the stories he had told, people they had met, The places they had been. This random collection of Galileans had been to Jerusalem and back, they had been to hell and back.

And they had been changed, something had happened to them, their families knew it, they knew it too and it hurt deep, deep, down. It was not just grief or fear but the loss of all that they had shared together, the loss of that life with him. They had never known such a feeling, the feeling of being fully alive.

They had never known such friendship, men and women together like family.

They had never felt so close to God, never had the scriptures been explained so clearly, never had the psalms sounded so sweet.

How they longed to be together again, to walk with him again, to hear his stories one more time, to break bread together.

It had all come as a shock to them, some were still traumatised, it was not supposed to end that way. Still, you cannot say the things that he said or do the things that he did and get away with it. The powers and principalities of this world would not allow it.

The journey to Jerusalem had not been a mistake, they knew that, it had been part of the plan all along to celebrate Passover together in the city and to proclaim the coming reign of God under the noses of the Roman forces of occupation and the compromised Jewish leaders.

Remember the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate, and his legions entering the city from the west in their annual show of strength in anticipation of the nationalistic fervour generated by the Passover celebrations. Remember Jesus and his band of country peasants parading into the city from the east. Jesus riding a donkey, disciples waving palm branches, amused onlookers crying hosanna as if greeting their king. This was not just a parade this was parody - bringing down the mighty from their thrones, uplifting the poor.

Then there was the incident in the temple. They were not sure what he was going to do when he got there and, boy, did he take everyone by surprise.

They had never seem him so angry, shouting at the top of his voice, turning the tables, sending coins scattering all over the flag-stones, sending pigeons flapping into the air and temple court officials scurrying.

He broke the rules, he went too far, he undermined both the Roman and Jewish authorities and challenged their power and like many a prophet before him he paid the penalty. It did

come as a shock to them but it was as if he expected it and, if that was going to be the way it would end, he accepted it.

When they re-entered the city later in the week the authorities were waiting. It was all over so quickly – arrest, trial, execution. Those last few days were a blur. Before they knew what had hit them he was dead, not one of them stood by him, they all scattered and hid in fear of their lives - grief-stricken and ashamed.

Then he came to them. They could not explain it so they did not try to. His death they had counted as defeat but this changed everything. He was alive to them again, risen in their midst and they would not deny him again. They had been blind but now they saw clearly what his life and his teaching had been about. Finally, they understood.

His death and rising to life became the key to understanding their own experience, to re-interpreting the effect he had had on their lives. They had been changed, transformed, their old selves were dead, it was as if they had been born again, they too lived a new life and could never go back to their old ways.

Within weeks they were gathering together again, telling of his appearances, alive again, remembering him in a new way – the stories he had told took on new meaning, the things he did took on a significance which they hadn't realised at the time. And they were witnesses to it all. They had Good News for sharing.

Within months they were continuing his work. They returned to Jerusalem. No longer in hiding but meeting in public to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection. Ancient scripture had new meaning and found its fulfilment in him, Jesus the Christ.

And they were witnesses to it all.

Those first Christians did not come to this new understanding through reading the Gospels, the Gospels were the product of their new understanding.

Those first Christians did not come to this new understanding through reading the Easter story of the Risen Christ, their experience of the risen Christ compelled them to tell the story.

Within a few years the theme of dying and rising, of death and resurrection was central to their understanding of what it meant to be his followers.

It expressed that personal transformation which they had experienced.

Some of Jesus followers experienced a vision of the Risen Christ a few days after his death and for others their experience occurred years later. One of those was Paul who wrote:

I have been put to death with Christ on his cross so that it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2: 19f)

That theme also expressed the life to which they were called as a community of the resurrection – a community they entered through the ritual of baptism:

Again Paul wrote:

By our baptism we were buried with Christ and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death...so also might we live a new life.

Many early baptistries were made in the shape of a cross or of a grave

for **the old life was dead**

- the life that had been lived in obedience to religious dogma and rituals of purification. Every aspect of life governed by laws designed to guide, to order, to control. Laws designed to bring the people closer to God but which for so many people because of the poverty and hardships of their circumstances in reality acted as a barrier to God.

But now in Christ they lived a new life.

Nothing created by God could be unclean and no one – not the poor, not the sick, not the persecuted – could be beyond God's blessing and God's love.

The old life was dead.

The life lived in obedience to strict codes of behaviour marking the boundaries of gender, tribe and race with harsh penalties for those who brought dishonour on their families.

But now in Christ they lived a new life.

In Christ there was neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, slave nor free.

The old life was dead.

The life lived in obedience to the powers of this world who rule by use of force or through the privileges of wealth or political cunning.

Power exercised by the few regardless of the consequences for the many.

Advantage maintained by power, power sustained by any means possible.

But now in Christ they lived a new life.

A life characterised by integrity and justice, by compassion and forgiveness, by turning the other cheek and going the extra mile.

This was the way of Jesus and the Way to God.

The way of dying and rising to new life.

Dying to enslavement, rising to the new life of freedom.

Dying to anxiety, rising to the new life of joy.

Dying to suspicion, rising to the new life of peace.

Dying to indifference, rising to the new life of love.

They were not expecting resurrection but they recognised it and knew it to be true. They recognised it in one another, dying to the old way of being, born again to new life in Christ.

They recognised it in his stories of prodigal sons welcomed home with open arms and tales of lost sheep, searched for and returned to the safety of the fold.

They recognised it in the people they had encountered.

A man, out of his mind, restored to his right mind and to his people,

A woman, bleeding for many years, unclean and ostracised, healed and embraced as a daughter of Abraham.

And they recognised it whenever they gathered to share bread and wine as his people, the Body of Christ, the Church, the community of resurrection.

They were not expecting resurrection, are we? On this Easter Sunday as we gather as his people to share bread and wine, may we recognise resurrection, in our lives, and in the life of the world and may we know it to be true.

The old life is dead. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.