**Sermon Easter at Stowe 2023**

2 weeks ago I took part in a presentation of the Easter story to groups of year 5 & 6 children and asked them what it was all about. What do you think the first answer was? Chocolate. I did get some better answers almost immediately.

This perception of what Easter means matters because it determines how each individual reacts to the Easter events. Let me ask you the question; What difference does the cross and resurrection of Jesus make to the way you live your life? The last national census told us that for the first time we, the group that identifies itself with Jesus is in a minority. Someone said yesterday that 25% of those calling themselves Christian do not believe in the resurrection. The majority, we have to remember, includes Muslims, Hindus, Jews and other religions so maybe it’s not so bad. But the unpleasant fact is that for most people, a majority in our nation, the answer to what difference does it make is simple; no difference at all. Let’s make the assumption that this parish is typical of the census that 25% believe in the resurrection, if that’s right, why are they not here? You might like to address that very difficult question at your AGM.

We come back to the original question; what difference does it make? I am a firm Trinitarian. I think that you can’t make sense of Jesus and what he did, what he taught how he healed, indeed who he was without having some idea of where he came from. And Jesus’ life, death and resurrection couldn’t have happened without the work of God’s Sprit. Hidden behind the real wonderful Jesus and a real and wonderful Spirit is a real wonderful Creator to whom we attach the label God. For some people the concept of there being an invisible creator who set up our universe in a wonderful way is not credible. If you argue that logically there must be a creator, that will be countered by their belief that Science will explain everything. There will be a human answer and nothing remote or divine is necessary That can’t be proved. Waiting for a scientific answer is just as much a belief system as the Christian faith and just as unprovable. For atheists God is impossible and I have to say that I think they are very brave. We need a God because without a God there can be no resurrection.

Past events from let’s say 2000 years ago are very difficult to prove but I think it’s a matter of history that a man called Jesus walked in Galilee, though lots think the Jesus story is not true at all – it’s a fabrication. I think the facts speak for themselves. Others recognise that Jesus was a real person who lived about 2000 years ago and that he was a great man who we should admire and listen to and try to follow his way but when we get to the end of life, his death and particularly his resurrection, people go all woolly and hazy. How can that happen? It’s not credible. Show me the proof. Therefore, says the agnostic, since proof is not forthcoming, since the resurrection is a unique event I have to ignore his life and the implications from it.

The alternative view, which is an act of faith, is that Creator God exists and cares about the universe and the world he or she or it created. No story has such power to transform us and the world as the Easter story: of resurrection, hope and new life. Easter is not a fairy-tale, told to impart a moral message, it is not a thriller designed to keep us entertained. Easter begins as a horror story with betrayal, torture, false convictions cowardice pain and death, burial and ignominy as its themes. The world with its failures, hatreds, brutality, and selfishness threw all of that at the one man who was flawless in every respect and succeeded in causing his death, his end. So far so ordinary. That sort of death has happened to millions of people.

All of that sin was poured out on that first Friday. But there is a great overwhelming ‘but’ from the one who created the world, and Jesus, and you and me. BUT God the creator who could and can do anything and everything imaginable and more things we can’t imagine, changed the order of things by resurrecting Jesus. There’s a case to be made that Easter should be called But Sunday to remind us of God’s unilateral, once for all, intervention. No, we don’t understand. No we don’t know how it happened but we know why. It’s just the sort of thing that a loving creator would do to show us how much he/she/it is prepared to do to show love for his fallen creation.

What I’ve said so far is at a high level – theology. But we need to understand at a human level what happened and how it applies to us. So I want to pick 3 examples of men and women involved to help us relate to this amazing event we celebrate today.

My first person is Barabbas, the murderer and rebel. The troublemaker who was preferred by the Jewish authorities to Jesus. On the one hand a man who cared for people, who loved people, even his enemies, who wanted his Father’s best for everyone and the best comes from self sacrifice to benefit others. Contrast with the man who believed that violent rebellion was the way forward to his nation’s independence and freedom – with him as one of its leaders, of course. He was prepared to fight and be arrested and die for that cause. It’s an extreme comparison but we are often faced with decisions that have choices to love our neighbour as ourselves or to take the course that benefits ourselves. Barabbas is a real choice.

My next person is not often highlighted. He is Joseph of Arimathea. He was part of the hierarchy who, even though he opposed it, condemned Jesus in his mock trial. He was a secret supporter of Jesus and spoke against the decisions of the Sanhedrin. By stepping forward to claim Jesus’ body he put aside his secret belief – hidden because of the fear of scorn and derision and losing his place among the great. He made himself publicly known by going to Pilate and asking for Jesus to prevent the body taken from the cross and being discarded – maybe to be eaten by dogs or put into a nameless hole and forgotten. He wanted his Messiah to be treated honourably and gave his own grave and his own reputation to do this. What a star and what an example for us. When we meet a situation which offers us a choice of either speaking out and acting for Jesus or ducking and hiding our face in inaction, Joseph should be an example to us of bravery and determination to follow Jesus.

My final person or persons are the women who went to the tomb. It was action that was hidden, unlike Joseph, they did it very early in the morning when there was no-one about. But this was an essential expression of their love of Jesus even after his humiliating death. They went knowing what they wanted to do but not knowing how to do it. They knew where the tomb was but expected problems from soldiers guarding the tomb and from the stone closing it up. You all know the story – we just heard it read to us as the Gospel. What they did is a fine case study of work for Jesus that is hidden, effective, compassionate - not done publicly but quietly and with love. Many of us have opportunities to see the need of others and to quietly meet those needs – not as dramatically as Joseph but with great love and cost to ourselves. That’s Jesus work.

This Easter 2023 gives us this opportunity to come together and give thanks and to worship the God who created us and loved so much he sent Jesus to save us – and for us to resolve to do even more to follow the way set by Jesus to show his love through our lives with the hope and expectation that when we meet him it will be “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter your Master’s kingdom.”