

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Cursed are those who depend on mere humans... they are like barren bushes in the desert...they live rootless and aimless in a land where nothing grows. Jeremiah 17, 5-8

“If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we’re a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries.” 1 Corinthians 15, 12, 16-20

“How happy are you who are poor: yours is the kingdom of God...But alas for you who are rich: you are having your consolation now.” Luke 6, 17, 20-26

Today’s readings are a good sampling of the variety of measures God takes to convince us that we are indeed loved. While the Bible is a collection of texts written by story-tellers, prophets, poets, historians and preachers, it is essentially the story of God’s love for humanity as seen through the eyes of the various authors whose writing is included. The Bible is the story of God’s saving love for the world. It is a mixture of encouragement, stark challenge, shock tactic, logical argument and inspirational story. Today’s readings give us a taste of challenge, logic and shake-up.

I was taken with Paul’s clear, uncomplicated understanding of the resurrection: Jesus died, Jesus, rose. We die, we rise because of our close links with him. He was dead, now he’s alive. We’re going to die, but that’s not the end of it. We, too, will be raised up by God.

The surprising thing for Paul was that he found himself having to put this argument to a group of Christians in Corinth among whom he had lived and worked for an extended period. Why to goodness, he argues, would anyone bother about embracing Christianity if its very foundation - the resurrection of Jesus - were torn out of it? But Paul has forgotten that everyone, even the most committed and well-instructed of Christians, has doubts at least occasionally.

It is true that theologians have struggled to articulate exactly what resurrection looks like. It is also true that some people express their doubts about resurrection when they protest that nobody has ever come back from the grave to tell us about it.

If we didn’t have doubts from time to time about resurrection, then we would not be human. And those doubts are expressed in all kinds of ways. There are some people who, when they look at the social ills of the world, get frustrated with others who try to tell them that all will be well in the next life when inequalities all evaporate in the reorganisation that comes with resurrection. The urgency to address the needs of a starving, hurting world pressures some to argue that this life is the only chance we have, so it’s now or never.

Then there are those who can’t get their heads around the notion of reconstructed bodies. Their concept of resurrection is one of all the atoms that make up our bodies being regathered and reassembled at resurrection. They’re a bit like nervous and neurotic army quartermasters who have to account for every little piece of equipment. Perhaps they would

do well to look closely at the bodies they have right now and consider whether they want them back exactly as they are.

There are others among us who sometimes think of resurrection as a smoke and mirrors trick. One moment we're being lowered into the grave and the next moment we're up and running again. Others still are tempted to take consolation from the view that if we can't be raised from the dead, then nobody will get a chance to do us any further harm.

Underneath all these doubts and questions is not so much a problem with resurrection as a problem with God. To hold on tightly to such doubts is effectively to cast God in the mould of a Jekyll and Hyde, a Frankenstein, a magician or a mind-bender. That can happen when we lose sight of the link between the resurrection of Jesus and the way he lived his life. God's raising of Jesus from the dead was not simply a show of power. Nor was it designed as a demonstration to those who crucified Jesus that they were now outsmarted. God raised Jesus from the dead to show the world what he thought of the human life that Jesus had lived. The Resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus' integrity. If you like, it was God's way of applauding and giving the stamp of approval to Jesus' life. What's more, it was a triumph over all who either fear or loathe a life of love.

That same God applauds and confirms our attempts to live with integrity by extending to us a share in Jesus' resurrection. Today's gospel offers us a guide on how to live with integrity. And it's a pretty good insight into the real meaning of Valentine's Day!