

SERMON: 23 September 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Resurrection as the sign of the Kingdom of God’s arriving in great power”

(Mark 8:31-9:10)

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ,

by the power of your presence

open the mind of God to us,

that in your light we may see light,

and in your strength be strong. Amen.

Today’s reading is all about resurrection. Resurrection, as the sign of the arrival in Power of God's Kingdom. So let me share a few thoughts about that.

1] In verse 31, Jesus explained to his followers that he would be killed and three days later be raised to life again.

There can be no resurrection without there first being a death. But the passage shows us how difficult it is for ordinary people like you and me to grasp the concept of resurrection. It's counter intuitive, counter cultural and not of this world. Even after he explains it, the disciples were left confused and bewildered. Three times the disciples try to tell Jesus there must be another way, another plan, and three times Jesus gives them an example of what true Messiahship looks like - to take up one’s cross, to lay down one’s life for Jesus’ sake and the Gospel’s, to take the last place, humble oneself like a little child and become to become a servant to all. Those are the things where true greatness lies. But for the disciples, it was so hard to grasp. It would take the events of Easter and Pentecost before the penny would begin to drop.

2] In verse 32, we’re told that Jesus opened his heart and spoke freely with his disciples

It's so important to speak about things which are often avoided, things like death. Jesus wasn't frightened to speak about his own death. So many people are frightened about death. They can't speak about it. We see it in this passage of Scripture. Peter hated the idea of Jesus talking about his own death. It wasn't what he wanted to hear. He had other plans for the Messiah, plans which were not like God's plan.

But I wonder why some people today avoid the topic of death? Is it because to speak about it might bring it on? That's a weird belief but I know it's one that is widely held. But surely that can't be rational. If we could make things happen purely by thinking about them or speaking about them then so many other things would happen wouldn't they?

But even medical people will tell us that talking about something which is painful or frightening can be helpful. It can be good therapy. Therapy is the Greek word for healing. So in other words talking about these things can help us to feel better. It can help the mind process thoughts. Indeed if we don't process our thinking then we can get stuck and thoughts get buried deep in the sub conscious and will then plague us again and again in the future.

We need to create safe places where we can talk openly and honestly about our struggles, our hurts, habits and hang ups, and avoid the unnecessary build up of painful emotional baggage which plays havoc with our understanding of who we truly are.

Because what often happens with emotional baggage is that it covers over the image of our true self and makes it difficult for us to experience the Divine Presence at the heart of our being.

Thomas Keating wrote a book about this called Intimacy with God. In it he says a lot about emotional formation that takes place in childhood and argues that it's the vocation of parents to manifest in daily life the kind of love that God has for their children but that so often in childhood we pick up the wrong idea about God. For example, we might see God as a tyrant if we've experienced harsh religious instruction. Or we might see God as an implacable judge, quick to point the finger of guilt or blame. Or we might see God as a type of policeman always on the watch to catch us in the least little fault. Children that experience these caricatures of God will want nothing to do with God and find it difficult to hear the gospel.

The solution he argues is to develop friendship with Christ through a life of prayer where we allow Christ to be God in us and do his work in us. He says this, “as we sit at the foot of the cross, identifying with the man on the cross who endured all the consequences of our personal alienation from God, we are being healed of our emotional wounds and the wounds we have inflicted on our conscience. Through movements of interior resurrection there may come a breakthrough into permanent resurrection as the false self finally falls away, giving us the habitual freedom of the children of God”.

Keating really stresses the importance of the kind of contemplative prayer where we become silent on the inside and when we do that our old self is emptied out and the new self grows into union with God. It's what the apostle Paul called the transformation that comes from the renewing of our minds. And I think it's what Jesus means by laying down the self.

So where do we find the safe places that we need to keep us emotionally healthy? First, we need to create the space to pray. We need to draw aside. We need to be still and know there is a God who is there for us and with us. We need to contemplate Christ, the Divine presence with us and within us. We need a daily private practise and the intention to turn our attention to the God who is bigger than any fear or any issue that causes fear, harm or upset.

We need to draw aside from this mad world and remind ourselves that we are anchored in Christ and that's where we will find our true selves at home. And we need to work at that daily habit until it becomes part of who we are. And in this, we will discover what death and resurrection looks like. We will see what in us still needs to die and we will trust the Divine Presence of God to bring resurrection because the Risen Power of Christ abides within us.

Second, we need each other. We need to feel safe with each other. We need to be able to trust each other. And we need to do it in Christ.

3] In verse 34, Jesus tells his followers, you must be willing to share my cross and experience it as your own, as you continually surrender to my ways.

Jesus tells us that death is not something to be avoided but that his cross is to be taken up and experienced as our own. Letting go, laying down, ending and surrendering are key moves in the life of the kingdom of God. Rather than being the actions of failure they are the keys to resurrection and new everlasting life.

4] So what then might resurrection look like? As I said already, I think we discover this when we draw aside in a daily habit of prayer and contemplation, so much of it will happen under the surface, with new habits being formed as old ones give way. The process of change will happen so gradually that we usually won't notice the new life emerging but we must trust that it is happening and it will fully happen in the end.

There are seeds of resurrection growing among us. Some of us are discovering we have new passions that we can't ignore, things that we must do, as the old gives way to the new, signs of God's kingdom arriving in power.

The more and more we give ourselves to this process of interior resurrection, the more and more we will see our lives changed and our communities transformed for good.

May we pray. Lord, may we draw aside and let you be God in us. May we know the power of your resurrection at work in us. May we experience the transforming power of your Holy Spirit, who makes us one with you and one with each other, and brings your kingdom nearer and nearer. Amen, and thanks and glory be to God.