

Easter Service Sermon Jesus College 27th April 2014

Job 19.23-27; John 20.24-31

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

In nomine...

Easter Sermon: In Defence of Life

I've just heard an extraordinary true story. It was about a twelve-year old boy who was worrying about going back to school. I think lots if not all of us can remember that feeling... and I hope not too many of you were worried about starting this term... What this boy was worried about was a girl. No, not because of unrequited love. But because she kept hitting him, and he said to his dad, "but I can't hit a girl". He didn't know how to respond. And knowing of the courteous and gentle nature of this young lad, it would have been the same if it were a boy hitting him. He needed to learn how to defend himself.

The little boy's story is a serious one. The Ducks of Jesus College are less so, but, warming to my theme of defence, two of our Fellows Suzanne and Katrin, and two of our Lodge staff Joyce and Chris, were the great defenders last week of our very own college Duck, who was safely escorted out of Front Quad, away from the predatory male ducks who wanted to – er – help her have another brood (as if eleven isn't enough - if you're a duck), all the way through Oxford down to the life-giving water of the Cherwell, at a time of day (before any of you were up, I can tell you that) when they could settle before night fell and the foxes came out.

Defenders. Of course Katrin, Suzanne, Joyce and Chris have nothing to do with superheroes in comics (they may be superheroes in the duck world, but Jesus College is hardly a comic...). But we all have to do some defending. Perhaps it's defending a little brother or sister. Or defending a thesis. Or defending our actions in a relationship.

This term our sermon series is on Apologetics. I don't need to tell you that that's not about saying sorry. It's about being a defender. Christian apologetics is about defending our faith. So we'll hear lots of different voices throughout the term, not *proving* their beliefs, but *defending* them. You can't prove a belief: but you can defend a belief. That's apologetics.

So I'm now going to spend a few minutes being Apologetic. And as last Sunday was Easter Day, I'm going to defend my belief that Jesus Christ is alive.

There's pretty good Classical and archaeological evidence that at least Jesus existed, historically. That he went about doing some extraordinary things, and teaching about God. That he seems increasingly to have taken risks, knowingly speaking against things that the political and religious authorities held dear.

Then there's a large amount of evidence – including my presence here today speaking to you like this – that something massive happened, that meant that his stories were handed on and on, even in the face of risk and danger, disbelief or disinterest.

There were immediate followers of Jesus, and they didn't just disperse in despair after he had been crucified horribly as a criminal. Rather, something brought them back together, something brought them back to the heart of what Jesus had been trying to show them in his life.

And that "something massive" happened shortly after his death. The tomb was empty. The body gone. And an increasing number of people saying that they knew he was risen, alive again, and that they or others they knew had seen him.

Now, say you wanted Jesus dead. Well, wouldn't you keep his body safe and sound, ready to mock any followers who hadn't been frightened off, with the disfigurement, the dried blood, the cold flesh, the ugliness of death? But they couldn't.

They couldn't, because he wasn't there. They couldn't because in some miracle that goes beyond explanation, he was now alive. It wasn't a dream. It wasn't that a couple of women, sleep-deprived, grieving, still in shock, had a delusion of angels speaking to them.

His body was clearly gone, and the Gospels describe a number of different events where the risen Jesus was encountered. We heard one of them in the reading from John earlier. Our question tonight – Why believe in the Resurrection? – was Thomas's question. Jesus has already appeared to his disciples, showed them *who* he was, and *that* he was. But Thomas hadn't been with them. Thomas is unconvinced. And he says so. He wants to see for himself. Moreover, he wants to do something which is, when you think about, really gruesome. He wants to stick his fingers into the wounds.

In tonight's reading we heard what happened next. Jesus appeared once again to the disciples, and this time, Thomas was there. 'Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

Jesus is physical. Jesus has flesh. Jesus has a body. Feet that were nailed to the Cross: he's standing on them. Hands that were torn against the wood of the Cross: he's holding them out to his doubting friend. His side that was stabbed by a spear, where blood and water flowed from: he invites Thomas to feel the wound. Jesus is unbelievably real. So unbelievably real and heart-stoppingly present that Thomas doesn't need to reach out. He knows. He gasps. He proclaims Jesus as his Lord and his God. Thomas has his *apologia*.

Jesus had new life, resurrection life - and the lives of disciples then and ever since are changed. Jesus offers the hope of resurrection life through belief in his own. My defence of my faith is a defence also of my life, since my life is publicly based on my beliefs. So my life, my being, is itself a defence of my faith.

On October 11th 1521, that title, Defender of the Faith, was granted by the grateful Pope Leo X to our royal founder's father, Henry VIII. Henry had written his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* which was something of a best seller in the Vatican bookshops back in the day. Unfortunately once Henry needed to get shot of Katharine of Aragon, he changed his mind, and in 1530 Pope Paul III revoked it. But Henry liked it, so he got Parliament to give it back to him – and our monarchs have been *Fidei Defensor* ever since.

And that's apologetics. Being *Fidei Defensor*. We men and women of faith need to be Defenders of Faith in an age where we are so frequently, and so inaccurately, dismissed as cranks and irrationalists. Whether by our words or our lives, Christians need to learn how to defend ourselves and our faith. Letters from secularists to the Telegraph will go on being written. Debates about the Established Church will go on happening. None of us are going to get terribly apologetic about all that. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified, dead, buried and risen again: that I want to defend. And so should you.

Three years ago Frank Skinner (who, like many comic performers, is a devout Christian), interviewed Archbishop Rowan in a packed Canterbury Cathedral. And while they were speaking, Frank Skinner said this:

. . . if I'm in Italy or somewhere like that, you can cross yourself and kiss statues and nobody even notices. And I love that, because we need to claim that back. Because there's been too much apologising - I hope you'll forgive me saying that I think the English Anglican church has been one of the most guilty of this - too much apologising for the magic in religion. People saying, we don't actually believe in the Virgin Birth, and we're not certain about the Resurrection. Don't give in to them - if you believe in God, all bets are off.

Well I believe that Jesus Christ is risen. And that really does mean that all bets are off.

Don't apologize. Be an apologist. Like Frank. Like Thomas.

Like Christ.