

What good is resurrection?

St. Brandon's

Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

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Have you come across IICSA? It stands for the 'Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse' and was established in March 2015 to explore the extent to which State and non-State institutions have failed to protect children from sexual abuse, and to make recommendations about what steps are necessary to protect children from such abuse in future.¹ The Church of England has been one of the institutions which has been part of the investigation, with a particular focus on the Diocese of Chichester, and there has recently been a lot of coverage particularly in the church press of the proceedings of the Inquiry.

As you might imagine, this does not make for easy reading. The horrendous stories of victims (or 'survivors' of abuse as they are often known) tell of lives forever scarred by the abuse they suffered, and of the fact that not being heard, believed, taken seriously, and the institutional barriers put in their path have been in many cases as damaging as the abuse itself. Then there are details about the abusers and how they managed to carry out such abuse, sometimes over prolonged periods and involving multiple victims, while somehow remaining hidden within the church's structures.

It's not difficult to name such abuse as sin, even if that's not a word we generally feel comfortable using nowadays. But using that word, our passage from 1 John says that "No one who abides in him [God / Christ] sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him", though this is better translated as "No one who continually abides in him [God / Christ] makes a habit of sinning; no one who habitually sins has known him". In other words it's not so much about an individual act but about sinful habits over time, and the impossibility, therefore, of abiding in Christ if such sinful tendencies persist. And yet there were abusers who led otherwise exemplary Christian lives, who seemed somehow to disprove this – both apparently abiding in God while habitually sinning in this appalling way – and led others to conclude that they couldn't possibly be involved in that sort of thing, now could they?

But following on from the individual stories, the focus of the Inquiry has been on the institutions involved. Why did they not see what was happening? Why did they not prevent it? Why did they seem more interested in seeking to protect their own people and preserve their own reputation, rather than confront the problem and protect the vulnerable? And the Church as institution does not come out of this well. And then the Inquiry has moved on to ask what these institutions, including the Church, have done, are doing, and need to do, to ensure this can never, does never, happen again? And that might well have further implications for us in relation to safeguarding.

Now that is, you might think, an odd and rather depressing way to begin a sermon on the resurrection. But let me make it worse before I try to make it better. You'll have probably been saddened, as I have, to hear of the many young lives lost in London this year – 51 so far, all due to a surge in violent crime. As with the cases of sexual abuse, there are obviously the victims – those who have lost their lives, and their families and friends who are also scarred for the rest of their lives by the violence and the loss of their loved ones. And equally obviously there are the perpetrators, including those who have carried out sickeningly cowardly 'drive-by shootings', as they've become known. And of course we can blame those individuals and hope they are brought to justice. And of course we can blame the parents who brought them up.

But also, of course, it's bigger than that. There's a race element to this, with many victims being black. There's a drugs element to it, with many caught up in the drugs supply chain that reaches from

¹ See <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/terms-reference>.

Tottenham's streets to 'customers' in Aberdeen.² There's an austerity element to it with neighbourhood policing having almost vanished, and 40% taken out of local authority budgets with associated cuts to youth services. And there's a despairing hopelessness element to it, with gun and knife crime among teenagers simply accepted as a new normal. In other words, as with child sexual abuse, there's both an individual and an institutional and, in this case, cultural element to this, with institutions failing to protect the vulnerable and failing to provide an environment in which all can flourish.

Now what has the resurrection of Jesus to do with all of that? And it seems to me that if we cannot make a connection between Jesus' resurrection and these kinds of events (to say nothing of nerve agents in Salisbury, chemical weapons in Syria, the continuing migrant crisis and so on and on), then we might as well pack up and go home. If there is nothing from Jesus' resurrection that allows us to speak into and do something about all of these kinds of situations, then we may as well hand in our tickets; he would simply not be a God worth believing in. So what can we say? And what might that lead us to do?

We have to start, I think, not with Jesus' resurrection, but with His death. And the first and obvious thing to say was that Jesus was Himself a victim. And He was a victim not just of those particular individuals involved – Judas, the chief priest, those who beat Him up and whipped Him and humiliated Him, Pilate and the Roman soldiers who actually crucified Him – but of the 'system' – of the Jewish religious authorities who were more concerned to protect their own, and protect the apparent integrity of their own institution, and of the Roman system that was more concerned with order than with justice.

The second obvious thing to say of Jesus' death is that it was the death not just of a human being but, as we understand it, of God Himself. And therefore of a God who identified with us, a God who is revealed as one who shared in the dirt and the pain, the weakness, the loneliness and the dying that is the common experience of human kind. And, again as we understand it, a God who in the very act of suffering with us, somehow absorbed all the pain and darkness of the world. In other words, as we say week by week, He took away / takes away the sin of the world.

But if it were to end there, it might make for a moving and perhaps salutary story about being prepared to suffer and die, about 'no greater love has man than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends'. But it would not hold out much hope, or much by way of understanding how things might become better. It might offer a crumb of comfort to the victims of this world, but not much more.

But the story does not end there, of course. On that first night, as the remaining eleven disciples and their companions gather to discuss the peculiar events of the day – a hint of resurrection early in the morning, the story of the Emmaus Road – Jesus Himself comes and stands among them. And the very first thing this tells us, of course, is that death is not the end, that the power of God is such as to be able to bring back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, that the power of God is such as to be able to do that for anyone and everyone. And it tells us that partly because, of course, the resurrected Christ comes back as still fully human – *look* at my hands and feet; *touch* me and see; *watch* while I *eat* some something, says Jesus. The God who in Christ so honoured humanity by becoming one with us, does not come back in resurrected form as a purely spiritual being, but as a still earthy human being, as flesh and bones. But not just as flesh and bones as we know from other resurrection appearances, for He is also transfigured, He occupies another order of being as He comes and goes apparently without physical restriction and eventually ascends into heaven.

But this resurrected Christ also returns still bearing the physical, and presumably too the mental and emotional, scars of His passion and death. They have not been taken away, this is not some newly minted

² See The Guardian interview with David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, 7 April 2018, from which most of this is taken.

Easter bunny rising out of a hat. This is a wounded God, a scarred God, a God who has suffered, a God who, as we understand it, continues to suffer with the pain and darkness of the world. And yet also those wounds that he bears (and surely not 'glorious' wounds) no longer seem to disable Him, no longer define who He is. They remain but are also transfigured.

Does this have something to say to the victims of child sexual abuse, to the victims of drive-by shootings, and to any of us who are victims of pain, victims of circumstance, who bear the loss of a loved one or the possibility of that, any of us who have perhaps suffered abuse ourselves? Surely this enables us to hold out the hope of new life and healing, not just in the next world but also in this. Surely this enables us to hold out the hope that the wounds can be healed, that they need not be defining even though they continue to be present. Therein lies the hope of resurrection.

But what about the other side of the coin? What does the resurrection of Jesus have to say to the perpetrators, and to the institutions which support and protect them? Well the word I want to pick out from both our gospel reading and the reading from Acts this morning is "repentance". "Repentance (and forgiveness of sins – I'll come back to that) is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations", says Jesus. "Repent, therefore, and turn to God" says Peter to the assembled crowd. Repentance starts with the realisation of the wrong that has been done. As Peter says to the crowd: you handed over and rejected Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One; you killed the Author of life Himself. Hardly a model evangelistic sermon, we might think! But Peter is putting it straight to them: you, individually, collectively and through the institutions that you belong to and support, and which in turn support and protect you, victimised and killed God Himself. Repent. In other words, stop doing this, do not sin habitually by continuing to do that to others, and turn to God, in other words turn through 180° to face God and to show your contrition. And then, but perhaps only then, will forgiveness be yours, and the process of healing and restoration that needs to go on in you, and which God longs for you, will be able to start.

Does that enable us to have something to say from the resurrected Christ (these are the words of the resurrected Christ) to the perpetrators of child sexual abuse, to those who bring violence to the streets of London and so on and on, and to the institutions which support and protect them? Just maybe it does.

But if so, what does it have to say to us first? We couldn't possibly be involved in that sort of thing ourselves, now could we?

Amen