

**Sermon: 2020/04/12 (Easter Sunday) - Jeremiah 31:1-6, Psalm 118:1-2,14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; &, John 20:1-18\_BTR**

How many Christians are there in the world today?

It's hard to say with much accuracy.

And any "figure" that one might volunteer is disputable.

It's "disputable" because it relies on having made certain "judgement calls" about where the line is between a *true* Christian - a person of conviction whose life observably reflects their beliefs, and one who merely *calls* themselves, "Christian" (for the sake of surveys, family, or culture).

Either way, some recent research by Pew has put the figure as high as 'a third (31%) of Earth's 7.3 billion people'.<sup>[n.1]</sup>

That's an extraordinarily *large* fraction - the largest "fraction," in fact - of the human species.

The "human species" that - some are saying - is facing something of a turning point with this (global) Covid-19 pandemic, which has sprung on us from the Far East.

And certainly some are saying - and I think this more likely to be true - the Church is facing a turning point because of it:

I look around - at mostly empty pews; and I think about my colleagues in this denomination and every other denomination, who, this morning, are also looking around "at mostly empty pews," and I start to feel some...disquiet, trepidation...concern - concern for how the virus, by forcing Christians to stay home, to be apart from one another, to put distance between themselves and the normal habits of religious observance - might prove to be another "coffin nail" in the "lid" of the decline of Faith in the West.

But the Church, of course, has found itself at many, *many* seeming "turning points" before.

For good or ill.

Both foreboding *and* promising "turning points."

And according to the typical analysis of historians and theologians, one such "turning point" - *the most important* of them all, perhaps - after the event retold in our gospel reading this morning, of course(!) - was, *undoubtedly*, one that occurred in the early fourth century during the reign of Caesar Constantine, ruler of imperial Rome, barely three hundred years after Jesus' ministry.

Constantine was one of a number of candidates to "wear the purple" and reign over a *vast* kingdom that stretched from Scotland to Iran.

But that "kingdom" was on "a knife's edge."

Its borders besieged;  
its public institutions weak.  
Politically polarised.  
On the brink of war with a hostile, alien Asiatic power.  
It felt to many like the End of the World.  
Traditional ideas and patterns-of-life were crumbling.  
A popular and successful general - many were looking to him for leadership.  
What was he to do?  
His reputation - the love and obedience he enjoyed - was restricted to the Latin-speaking province of Britain.  
And, *ethnically*, he was Greek-Serbian - not thoroughbred Roman.  
Thus, if he decided to press a claim to the capital in Italy - he would be just another grasping war-lord.

But then something caught his attention.  
A "path" to legitimacy and power - a brand new, *growing* - but persecuted - constituency among the citizenry:  
Looking around he saw Christians *everywhere*.  
Multiplying.  
"Under his feet."  
They occupied positions in the state bureaucracy,  
in the army,  
even in his household.  
When he went to the shops, there they were.  
When he went to the public baths, there they were.  
When he stood on the battlefield, there they were:  
among both his own soldiers and the soldiers of the enemies who confronted him  
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that is, both among the forces of the various rivals who challenged him for the emperor's throne *and* among the raiding hordes of the wild, hairy Goths from Germany.  
*Where had they come from?!*  
(The Christians.)  
What lay behind this remarkable - *and very rapid* - expansion of what had been, not long ago, a minor, despised Jewish cult from faraway, unimportant Palestine;  
"a minor, despised Jewish cult" which made *fantastical*, outlandish, superhero-een claims for some formerly unknown Galilean?  
A "remarkable expansion" that was taking place in spite of the fact that discipleship - with its expectation of sobriety and self-denial - "cut" directly against Roman Pagan fatalism.  
A pagan fatalism which looks extremely modern:  
It saw the grave as the end, and so encouraged a reckless, consumptive hedonism of "living for the now."

Because, after all, that's all there was - the here-and-now, *or so they thought*. So, how to explain this increasing number of Christians?

The explanation was simple.

The driving force was... excitement.

Excitement for a set of claims - *one* claim, in particular, actually, about an empty, open tomb in Palestine, whose (former) "occupant" no longer had need of it. *Matthew* and *Mark* agree that it was a small group of women who were the first to discover it - abandoned and no longer in use.

*Matthew* says it was, *exclusively*, two women, both of them called Mary: [28:1].

*Mark* includes a third - a stranger, to us - called, 'Salome': [16:1].

And in this pair of accounts it is an angel who first delivers the astonishing good news of Jesus having risen.

But then the accounts diverge:

In the first gospel, these women are described as being on their way to share with The Twelve what they'd learned when Jesus *Himself* intercepts them; 'And they [fell at His feet, their eyes full of joyful tears of relief] ...and [they] worshipped Him.' [Mt. 28:9]

In *Mark*, on the other hand, it is only Mary Magdalene who has this privilege: [16:9].

(Her companions having vanished from the text.)

She's presumably making the same thrilling journey described in *Matthew* - the "journey" of telling the disciples about what the angel had said - when Jesus confronts her (alone), but her testimony is dismissed by the men; ignored: [16:11].

*Luke* agrees with *Matthew* that it was a *whole* group of women who, *collectively*, together, encounter their young, miraculous master, walking around unharmed. Although he adds *another* name as having been present with the multiple Marys; a person called 'Joanna': [24:10].

*Matthew* doesn't mention any of the other disciples seeing Christ until Galilee, which was far north of Jerusalem [28:16-17].

Yet, *Luke*, however, describes two other persons unknown to us - one of them 'Cleopas' - meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus, which was in Judea - the South: [24:13f]. [n.2]

These two obscure personalities - perhaps both blood relatives of Jesus, such as His half-brother, James - then run back to the hiding place where Peter and the others were cowering in fear of the manhunt which was then raging, and Jesus appears to them all at once, "in one fell swoop": [24:33-43].

And then there's *John*.

He confirms that it was Mary Magdalene who found the Lord missing from His

burial-place in the garden [19:11f.], but has nothing to say about the Emmaus incident.

And, like *Luke*, he seems to contradict *Matthew*, remembering that Jesus was seen initially by His followers in the capital (or its suburbs) *before* they saw Him *again* back home *up* by the Lake of Tiberius.

Now, if, today, you are struggling to accept the Church's claim for Easter, that God beat death; that a poor carpenter's son walked away, unscathed, from having been brutally tortured and murdered, in the most heinous fashion - you might *seize* upon the confusion (I've highlighted) between the various versions of the episode in the New Testament as evidence to *legitimate* your doubts; to *validate* your scepticism.

But you would be wrong.

Indeed, I think one could look at the confusion we're presented with and see it as the *very* thing which *is* the evidence!

For the effect of excitement at news of an unexpected occurrence *often creates* confusion.

Gets us in a muddle.

Just watch a dog getting ready for "walkies," chasing his tail around and around and around thinking he's seen some furry stick, just out-of-reach behind him.

Think about the confusion - the disconcertedness - you feel at a surprise birthday-party, friends and family descending upon you to shake your hand and wish you well from every side.

Who said "hello!" first?

Who have you already spoken to?

Where did you put that glass down?

You know, I've no idea of half the people who came to my wedding day.

I look at them in photographs and I've no clue who they are!

And so imagine now, that you are a gospel-writer - an "Evangelist," one of the four - writing, after the fact, about the Resurrection.

And, as we know they did, you've gone round to the homes of the people who were there, to make a hard-copy of their recollections, and those witnesses began to tell you of that day; to *relive* it for you.

Imagine how they probably rose up out of their chairs and paced the room, waving their arms.

Imagine how they probably smiled and laughed - and perhaps wept too.

Surely, in their excitement, the *actual* chronology of who had seen what when became somewhat confused.

*But that excitement was infectious!*

- because it was genuine; because it real; because it wasn't feigned.

It was, like a certain, notorious virus, *very* "catching."

And, soon, within just a handful of centuries - as Constantine discovered, there

were Christians *everywhere*.

He became one too, in fact: conferring respectability and protected status on the Church.

And I pray we will be possessed by the same contagious excitement of the first Easter, today.

**Footnotes:**

1. See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>
2. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmaus#Historical\\_identification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmaus#Historical_identification)