

Sermon: 2021/04/11 (2nd Sunday of Easter, Year B) - *Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; & John 20:19-21_BTR*

[Invite children to the front.]

Kids' Talk: A Pleasant Surprise

[Be very quiet and still, like a statue.]

Boo!

Who doesn't like a good surprise?

Like an unexpected visitor.

Or a gift when it isn't even your birthday!

Well, a couple of days after Jesus was killed on the Cross, the women who had loved Him - Mary Magdalene, Salome and so on - went to His tomb to pay their respects; but, *to their surprise*, they found it standing open, and an angel sitting inside!

'Terrified' they ran away, but Jesus caught up with them and confirmed what they had been told - that He *was* alive.

The women, almost bursting with excitement, then went to tell the Apostles, but those men didn't listen to them.

(That's still a problem today isn't it, ladies?)

So, as they were sitting together, Jesus suddenly, *to their surprise*, appeared in the middle of their group!

Not by way of the door, nor down through a hole in the roof like the paralysed man. He just was...*there*.

Wow.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

The Resurrection: Now What?

Jesus *died*.

Jesus - a person as real as you and me;

an indisputably *historical* miracle-worker, whose existence is attested to by an *abundance* of evidence, direct and indirect - died.

And then rose.

Climbed *out* of His tomb:

left it behind like a pair of old shoes He had outgrown.

Which means death, *for some...* must be no longer final.

What do we *do* with this *extraordinary* information?

Life as normal?!

Do we continue with the same routine; go back to old habits; business-as-usual?

Or no?

This is our theme today. [Pause.]

Many remarkable men ruled the Roman Empire as "*Caesar*" during its *many* centuries of existence.

And *one* of the most "remarkable" of them, perhaps, was **Marcus** Aurelius.

If you don't know him from your own classical studies, or from the Ridley Scott movie *Gladiator* - where he was portrayed by the actor Richard Harris, you might

have come across him if you've ever taken a class in (western) philosophy:

Marcus Aurelius was, you see, not just a successful statesman and military leader, he also is a renowned *Stoic*.

"*Stoi-cism*" was a "school" of Greek thought - a language that he spoke in addition to his native latin, and he was one of its "leading lights."

He wrote an *extraordinary* amount - volumes and volumes; letters, books, poems - much of it during hard campaigning against fierce northern tribes like the Sarmatians and the (Germanic) "*Macromanni*."

And, having committed *so much* ink to paper - "*so much*" that was considered wise and worthy of preservation, he remains *widely* quoted.

Indeed, I came across a pithy comment of his just a few days ago -

he is said to have remarked that the past is a 'boundless abyss' and 'the future' is a country 'in which all things disappear.'^[n.1]

In other words - let's be specific, Marcus Aurelius doubted the likelihood of personal survival beyond death.

The future was merely the past but postponed, and what he could see about the past was that what what *had* been - the material and the physical - rarely could be maintained for very long:

it decayed, collapsed and soon was forgotten

- whether beloved ancestors, or art, or architecture...; cities and countries.

Rome was almost a thousand years old when he ascended the (imperial) throne (in A. D. 161), but the almost *constant* warfare against the barbarians suggested it hadn't much longer "on the clock;"

that her final hour had almost arrived - in Europe, at least.

'Soon, very soon, thou wilt be ashes,' he meditated, 'or a skeleton, and...not even a name... And the things which are much valued in life are empty and rotten and trifling, like little dogs biting one another, [or] little children quarrelling.'^[n.2]

What a bleak, depressing view!

But then many - like him - were disenchanted with traditional paganism - with gods like "Jupiter" and "Mars."

They seemed childish, cruel and...*inconsequential*.

Ancient religion with its pantheons of deities for *everything(!)* seemed highly implausible and gave *no* hope.

But something was happening that even the very clever Marcus Aurelius wasn't paying attention to.

Underground. - quite literally in the capital. [In the catacombs.]

The Church, which he thought was a passing fad.

("A flash in the pan," as it is said.)

The Church was growing - *like wildfire* on a hot summer's day.

More and more people were joining *all* the time.

Rich and poor.

Men and women.

Young and old.

And what they were doing - these (new) *Christians* - must have seemed bizarre to the wider public:

just look again at our reading from *Acts*, this morning:

I'll read that first verse for you (again) -

'Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.' [4:32]

Let that picture "sink in," for a moment.

Was this Communism?!

It looks a little like it, right?

(Let's "face it.")

What Luke (the author) tell us is that the wealth *inequity* - to use a fashionable word - among some of the early disciples - whatever it was - and it *surely* existed, was actively being "flattened;" the disparities minimised.

And why?!

They weren't being *forced* to do it.

This wasn't about creating an earthly utopia to satisfy some naive ideology.

This wasn't a "top-down" policy, imposed on the wiling and the unwilling alike.

No one was "strong-armed" by a government into doing what they did.

Rather, the early disciples *enthusiastically* starting disposing of their (private) assets for the benefit and furtherance of *the Jesus movement*.

To be clear: there's no indication that these people were always inclined to do so; that those early disciples were already very charitable people who..."sat lightly" to their personal things;

that they were *by nature* self-sacrificing philanthropists.

Rather, they were ordinary, selfish human beings like us.
And then, *bang*, their lives changed direction and their attitude was "flipped."
The catalyst;
the difference;
the "turning-point" was the risen Christ,
seen alive and unharmed after having been *murdered*.
So, it appears that, contrary to what Marcus Aurelius imagined - and there are lots
who would agree with him in this, the 21st century - '*all things don't disappear*'.
Jesus didn't.
And we don't have to *either*.
It is this *very* surprising possibility that led to sudden *huge* differences in
behaviour and attitude among those with whom the Gospel was shared; among
those who *believed* it.

Now, I don't think that what those early disciples did is a *binding*, timeless model
of what *we* should *exactly* do - you and I.
That is to say, I don't think that the attempt to eliminate wealth disparity *within* the
young Church is *normative* (for the *modern* Church).
But, if it is nothing else, it *is* a challenge.
A provocation.
To be *more* radical; *more* bold than we're (probably) being.
More...*holy*.
Because if Jesus' grave is empty, then why would I live like those who think it
isn't?
Amen?

Footnotes:

1. See: Radner, Ephraim (April, 2021), 'Music that is Never Heard', *First Things*, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/04/music-that-is-never-heard>, (accessed Apr. 8, 2021).
2. See: 'Marcus Aurelius: Excerpts from *The Meditations*' (1898), in Peck, Harry Thurston (Ed.), *The World's Great Masterpieces: Volume II*, New York, N. Y.: American Literary Society, pp. 682-694, 692.