

Hymns: **311** **“The day of resurrection”**
 532 **“Born in a stable”**
 401 **“Come, sinners, to the gospel feast”**
 “Mine eyes have seen the glory”

Readings: **Luke 24:36b-48**

“EATING HELPS BELIEVING”

A week ago I was taking a short break in the Channel Islands. To be precise, I was enjoying some time with friends on the picturesque island of Guernsey. I’m a bit of a sucker when it comes to replying to a request from friends and I had agreed to preach at the morning (and evening) service on the Sunday of our visit. They don’t have a conventional morning service that resembles in any way what happens at Wesley’s Chapel. For some years now, they’ve replaced that standard model with something they call “God and Marmalade”. It’s an intriguing idea and it brings together a goodly number of people who like this style of worship. Tables are arranged and laden with what we call a continental breakfast. And the preacher has somehow to get folk to sing a couple of hymns, to listen attentively to a short passage of scripture, to heed a short address and to say amen to a few prayers that are on offer. All this between the munching of muesli, the crunching of cornflakes, the coping with croissants, the peeling of fruit and the slurping of coffee. It’s quite an exercise. It’s certainly a challenge!

I must say that I have wondered about the efficacy of this version of what these days is being called “Fresh Expressions of Church”. What on earth do people take away from it? How does it play out in the long run? But my questions would have to deal seriously with some of the remarks that I heard from those who were present last week. One person said: “in the old days I came, I sat, I went; now, I come, I chat, I go with something to think about”. Others told me how strangers had become friends and how worship has become participative.

All this is testimony to what can happen when people get together to have a meal. Friendship is engendered, a readiness to talk freely discloses itself and a feel-good factor can definitely be detected.

Luke (and even more graphically John) has the story of the risen Jesus taking a meal with his disciples. In John’s case, there’s a BBQ – a fire lit on the beach to cook freshly-

caught fish. In Luke's case, it's simply "a piece of broiled fish". But Luke has also mentioned the meal enjoyed by those walking to Jerusalem from Emmaus. And it's precisely as people were eating, that "their hearts burned within them". It was while they were enjoying food that the scales fell from their eyes, recognition dawned on them, gladness filled their minds. And, in all these instances, Jesus began to show them the meaning of the scriptures. So perhaps there's more to God and Marmalade than we might have suspected.

As far as the opening up of the scriptures is concerned, they had of course heard it all before. He'd told them everything already during the years they'd walked the lanes of Galilee together. But so little of it seems to have registered. It took the death of Jesus and, more significantly still, the resurrection of Jesus to bring all they'd learned into some kind of coherent pattern. Imagine a jar full of water into which non-soluble material is poured. You stir it up and it's a pretty cloudy mix but, after a few minutes, a sediment begins to form at the bottom of the jar as everything settles. You take a stick and give the contents of the jar a good stir and all those particles rise to the surface again and swirl around. So it must have been with everything they had lived and learned in the three years they'd spent with Jesus. It all sank to the bottom and the raising of Jesus stirred it all into action again.

It was over food that all this began to happen. Material previously introduced into their lives now, at last, began to make sense. I've always been fascinated by the period – just days, at most weeks, between Easter and Pentecost. Apart from the rather spare descriptions of the appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples, there's almost nothing to go on. Scripture maintains a virtual silence. This represents a "black hole" in our knowledge. Yet it's during this very period that something like dynamite explodes, inexpressible energy is created. I'd love to know how the material these men made sense of over the breakfast table led to what was soon to become the exponential growth of the Christian message. In the weeks and months that followed these simple meetings, a true miracle was to occur.

It may be worth recalling the facts. Stories about the risen Jesus mention, again and again, just how perplexed and terrified his friends were. They were startled by his appearances, they thought they were seeing a ghost. Fear filled their hearts and this was accompanied by radical doubts that they were actually seeing what their eyes were telling them. They dismissed talk of the resurrection as "an idle tale"; they could not bring their minds to entertain the idea that this was happening. They were described as unable to recognise him even when he walked alongside them. This constitutes a pretty robust picture of a dispirited group of people. John even shows how, in search no doubt of consolation, they went back to their old lifestyles. The fishermen among them went back their boats.

It was to such a bunch of people that Jesus appeared. And he set about emphasising just how real he was. This was no mirage. No product of deluded spirits. "It is I", he declared, "I myself. Look. See for yourself. Touch me. Look at my hands and my feet. Give me something to eat." In all these imprecations, urging them to believe their eyes and other senses, he came amongst them and convinced them that he was really back, in no way any longer contained within the darkness of a tomb. Only then, were their hearts disposed to listen again to the claims he'd made often enough, that he would die and be raised again "in fulfilment of the scriptures". "Peace be with you." He could end the times that he spent with them reasonably satisfied that he had calmed them down and banished their fear.

CERN – Coseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire – is a place on borders of France and Switzerland where high science is currently being done. Scientists are looking for explanations of the origin of the universe. They've constructed an enormous tube that spreads over several kilometres of French-speaking territory. And it's along these tubes that they hurl particles which can reach virtually the speed of light. By making these particles collide with one another or else hit into a fixed object, they're hoping to learn about the way the universe came into being. They're searching for the secret of the Big Bang.

I'd like to set up a parallel investigation. I'd call this DISCERN – and it would constitute the search for an explanation of the origins of the Christian Church. What was it that turned this handful of fearful people from being almost immovable objects into a virtually unstoppable force? It's all a matter of particle acceleration – Christian ideas being driven in a dynamic way so that, within a decade of the death of Christ, the whole of the Mediterranean world was abuzz with a faith that knew no bounds. It was a veritable tsunami and its origins intrigue me.

Just think of it, it all began with breakfast. Everything that has become the worldwide Christian Communion started with God and Marmalade!

*Thy presence makes the feast,
Now let our spirits feel
The glory not to be expressed,
The joy unspeakable.*

And he began to explain..... A picture began to emerge. How can we describe this? Let me offer three angles of approach.

From the world of art: **pointillism** – the technique of painters we now group under the title of “neo-impressionism” and the work of Georges Seurat. This method, pooh-poohed by conventional artists at the time, consists of painting an incredible number of dots on a canvas. Out of the dots emerge shapes and contours and some of the realisations of this school of art are very very striking. A series of previously unrelated splodges of paint, in the end amount to a compelling picture.

From the world of literature, the idea called **streams of consciousness**. This is the attempt to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind. It’s a process sometimes called “the interior monologue”. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, our heads are racing with thoughts about so many things. They buzz around inside our heads like bees around a hive. Some writers have attempted to bring the apparent disorder of the human mind into their novels and essays. At first it takes a great effort to read such pieces but, lo and behold, especially when it’s well done, these attempts to make sense of overloaded minds result in extraordinary outcomes.

And from the world of science – something called a **chemical reaction**. This is a process that leads to the transformation of one set of chemical substances to another. You add sodium to water and end up with something quite different.

Round and round the thoughts go. Particles are accelerated to an almost unbearable speed before, BINGO! Something happens.

What had been a set of random teachings, exhortations, lived examples, words of warning, simple stories, grim experiences, challenges – they all cohere. We have take-off. The Big Bang of the Christian faith has occurred and throws its energy outwards, radiating its message into all the corners of the world.

John Wesley’s Foundery was a poor place – at least as far as its buildings were concerned. But many extraordinary things happened under its roof. One of them was the way Wesley took in what we’d call these days “the street homeless”, people with no resource whatsoever, and found lodging for them. They were beaten people, indigent and destitute. The preachers who ran the Foundery in Wesley’s absence were given strict instructions in Wesley’s absence that, at mealtimes, they were to eat with these outcast people. At the same time, the same food, and keeping company with these degraded human beings. It was all to be, Wesley argued, “a foretaste of the heavenly banquet” when there would be no street homeless people, no indigent or destitute members of the human race, - “a banquet prepared for all people.”

Around a meal table we can so often begin to experience the very stuff of which eternity is made. Eating does, indeed, help believing. Amen.