

Meeting the Christ

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The story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus presents us with some theological conundrums.

If we follow the Lucan stories of Jesus and the Resurrection then by the time Paul was heading for Damascus, Jesus had been removed from earthly events and had ascended into heaven. Pentecost had occurred and believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke presents us with a clean clear cut sequence of events:

Jesus died;

he rose from the dead;

he appeared to his disciples;

the appearances stop when he ascends into heaven (this is a mechanism for removing Jesus from earthly appearances)

The Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers empowering them in their faith journeys.

However Paul asserts that his 'Road to Damascus' experience was indeed an resurrection occurrence and he uses it to affirm his right to be called an apostle.

This leaves us with two questions:

1. Was this a resurrection appearance?
2. If it was can 'resurrection appearances' still occur?

John's Gospel presents us with a completely different sequence of events.

You will remember Mary sees Jesus walking in the garden and supposes him to be the gardener. When she recognises him she goes to grasp him but he tells her not to touch him for "I have not ascended to the Father".

However later that day he appears to the disciples in the locked room and invites Thomas to touch him; the corollary is of course that between the appearance to Mary and the appearance to the disciples Jesus had ascended to the Father but was still 'appearing' to his disciples.

On that same occasion he also 'breathes' on them and says 'receive the Holy Spirit'. This is John's Pentecost.

Now which of these accounts is 'true' Luke's rendition of events or John's?

And what really did happen to Paul on the Damascus Road?

This brings us back to the theme of much of our preaching over the past weeks – are these stories factual or metaphorical?

I like to think they are a mixture of both. Both Luke and John are telling a story and they are sharing an experience as is Paul.

Luke is attempting to put the story and experience in an orderly chronological sequence. He is writing comparatively closely to the actual time that Jesus walked the earth.

John however is writing at a much later time and is writing to a spiritually more mature audience. He is not particularly interested in order and chronology; he is however interested in experience and nuance.

Thus both Luke and John are telling the 'truth' in as much as 'truth' is contained in story and myth.

And what of Paul?

I have no doubt that Paul had an experience on the road to Damascus but I suspect that it did not come out of the blue, but arose out of Paul's own personality and his experiences and ponderings.

We know that Paul was a passionate man – he was a faithful Jew and he felt that this sect within Judaism, these followers of The Way, were an affront a danger to the purity of his religion.

He was a man of integrity and wanted to be obedient to his God.

We are told he witnessed the stoning of Stephen; an horrific way to die and yet a beautiful death as Stephen asked for his persecutors to be forgiven and as he willingly gave up his soul. How could a man of integrity not ponder and reflect on such a dying.

And he no doubt witnessed other acts of courage and generosity as he arrested and imprisoned others.

And now he is travelling in the hot dry sun seeking to get permission to arrest more of these people of The Way – pondering, thinking, reflecting, wondering as the sun beats down upon him.

And then he has a cathartic experience.

We have only heard a small portion of the whole story which is full of metaphor.

He is blinded – a metaphor for inner turmoil, not being able to see which way to go; an inner voice guides him – the voice of the risen Christ no less; he goes to Straight Street – now that is an interesting detail in the story; he meets Ananias who prays with him and ‘the scales fall from his eyes’ and he sees and understands.

This is reminiscent of Mary in the garden on Easter Morning. Jesus appears to her as the gardener; she is blind and does not recognise him; but when he speaks the scales fall from her eyes and she sees.

There are very strong parallels in these stories.

I like John’s gospel and the way that he tells the story. It is open-ended and invites possibilities that Luke’s rendition makes difficult.

Jesus is at one with God (he has ascended) and yet he still appears in the locked room, on the beach, at work and eating breakfast.

This, I think, is an invitation for us to meet the risen Christ in all these places too.

Like Paul we may reflect and ponder on deep matters and in the heat of the sun experience a catharsis that will change our lives forever; or like Mary we

can sit in the garden and hear the voice of the Christ speak to us in the whisper of the wind or the call of the tui.

Wherever there is an act of forgiveness, acceptance, inclusion, generosity, compassion... there is the opportunity to witness the Risen Christ in our midst.

And on this Earth day - wherever the planet is nurtured, protected, healed and cared for... there again the Risen Christ is amongst us.

This is the work and presence of Christ for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

For Christ is risen – Christ is risen indeed; Alleluia!