

## *The God Who Raises the Dead*

Once upon a time there was a miller who lived in a windmill, and ground flour for the village baker. Day after day the miller used to worry about whether he was producing enough flour. One night, after there had been no wind all day, he hit upon a plan. He would disengage the cogs of the windmill, and work all night turning the machinery himself, by hand. Then he would be sure that there would be enough flour. When morning came, there was plenty of flour, but the miller was slumped asleep on the floor, and the flour never got to the baker. So sound asleep was the miller that he never heard the noise outside, the noise of a rushing mighty wind.

If you have ears, then hear.

What are the implications of the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after he was executed? We looked at some of them in the last chapter of Part One, focusing finally on the call to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Now, in introducing our Part Two, we look at one of the largest, and hardest, questions of them all, which must be grasped firmly if our following of Jesus is to be rooted as deeply as it needs to be. What does the resurrection of Jesus tell us about the true God? What I want to say divides broadly into three: the surprising command, the sudden crisis, and the surpassing God.

First, the surprising command. The story is told of Moses

coming down the mountain to report back to the children of Israel. 'Good news and bad news,' he says. 'The good news is — we've got them down from forty to ten. The bad news is — adultery is still in.' When we think of God giving *commands* to his people, that's the sort of image we naturally go for, isn't it: of a God who has all sorts of rather arbitrary rules, and wants to give us more and more of them, most of them designed, it seems, to stop us doing things we might otherwise want to do. As the college barman in my undergraduate days once said to me, 'The trouble is, everything Jesus is against — I like.'

Now why would one invent a God like that? You may say, We didn't invent him, that's just who God seems to be. Or, perhaps, you are inclined to agree with the critics of Christianity who say that the Church, or perhaps the state, has invented a God like that to keep people under control. There may well be some truth in that; people do invent things to keep others under control. I heard recently of a small boy at a rather strict school who was asked to write down in order the worst things that humans could do, and wrote: Number 1: murder; Number 2: running down the school corridor. We all get things out of proportion.

But this conception of God is in fact a lie. The resurrection of Jesus proves that it's a lie. Do you know what the most frequent command in the Bible turns out to be? What instruction, what order, is given, again and again, by God, by angels, by Jesus, by prophets and apostles? What do you think — 'Be good'? 'Be holy, for I am holy'? Or, negatively, 'Don't sin'? 'Don't be immoral'? No. The most frequent command in the Bible is: '*Don't be afraid.*' *Don't be afraid. Fear not. Don't be afraid.*

The irony of this surprising command is that, though it's what we all really want to hear, we have as much difficulty, if not more, in obeying this command as any other. We all cherish fear so closely that we find we can't shed it even when we're told to do so. The person who has been worrying all term about exams finally finishes, and still wakes up the next morning with the adrenalin pumping, ready to dash off to the exam room one more

time. The person who has worried for years about money, and then suddenly inherits enough and to spare, still finds that he or she goes hot and cold all over when walking past the bank. It is said that once a practical joker sent telegrams to every member of the then government, saying simply: 'All is discovered — fly at once!'; within twenty-four hours they had all left the country. We are all of us, wrote anthropologist Nigel Barley, overdrawn at the moral bank. Every one of us has something on her or his mind about which we badly need a voice to say: 'Don't be afraid. It's going to be all right.' As the Lord said to Lady Julian: 'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' Let's make no mistake about it: until you learn to live without fear you won't find it easy to follow Jesus.

This surprising command bursts in upon a world in which we eat, sleep, and breathe fear. We emerge from the warmth of the womb into the cold of the cosmos, and we're afraid of being alone, of being unloved, of being abandoned. We mix with other children, other teenagers, other young adults, and we're afraid of looking stupid, of being left behind in some race that we all seem to be automatically entered for. We contemplate jobs, and we're afraid both that we mightn't get the one we really want and that if we get it we mightn't be able to do it properly; and that double fear lasts for many people all through their lives. We contemplate marriage, and we're afraid both that we might never find the right person and that if we do marry it may turn out to be a disaster. We consider a career move, and are afraid both of stepping off the ladder and of missing the golden opportunity. We look ahead to retirement, and are afraid both of growing older and more feeble and of dying suddenly.

And these are just the big ones. There are dozens of lesser fears which reinforce and feed on each other. What's more, if we artificially suppress these fears, they pop out in other forms, like phobias. Behind them all looms the fear of death; not, perhaps, for the young, unless they've had a close brush with death for some reason, but certainly a little later.

So you see why this command, 'Don't be afraid,' is one of

the hardest of all to keep. Even chastity is reasonably straightforward by comparison. Can you imagine living without fear? I don't mean the sort of secular 'fearlessness' one associates with the heroes of thriller stories or war exploits. There is such a thing as an arrogance, or pushiness, which is simply a cover-up job; I'm not talking about that. I mean, can you imagine living a normal, wise, responsible life *without* the nagging sense that everything is about to go horribly wrong, that you may have made it through the last day, or week, but that this was simply a happy accident, since the universe is basically unfriendly and Murphy's Law will take revenge later or, more likely, sooner? That is how most people live.

To that condition the gospel of Jesus comes with bad news and good news. The good news: there is just one command this time, not even ten. The bad news: this one command tells you not to be afraid, and we haven't a clue how to obey it. We don't like fear, but it's the air we breathe. We don't know any other way to live. This, actually, is why people imagine God as a God who is always giving orders and getting cross with people. We project our fears, yes, and our hatred, up on to the creator of the universe; we call this object, this idol, 'God'; and we are afraid of, and resent, the God we have thus made in our own mirror-image.

And the resurrection of Jesus issues the surprising command: don't be afraid; because the God who made the world is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and calls you now to follow him. Believing in the resurrection of Jesus isn't just a matter of believing that certain things are true about the physical body of Jesus that had been crucified. These truths are vital and nonnegotiable, but they point beyond themselves, to the God who was responsible for them. Believing in this God means believing that it is going to be all right; and this belief is, ultimately, incompatible with fear. As John says in his letter, perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4.18). And the resurrection is the revelation of perfect love, God's perfect love for us, his human creatures. That's why, though we may at any stage in our lives grasp the truth that God raised Jesus from the dead, it takes us all our life long to let that belief soak

through and permeate the rest of our thinking, feeling, and worrying lives.

Sometimes this process isn't just a gradual thing; it may involve sudden crises. There's a hidden chapter in the life of St Paul, which is usually ignored by those who see him either as the heroic missionary or the profound theologian, or possibly the misguided misogynist. Acts doesn't mention this hidden chapter, but in our second lesson we heard Paul himself speak of it. At one stage of his work in what he called Asia, and we call Turkey, he says that he went through a horrendous and traumatic experience which seemed to destroy him totally. 'I was so utterly, unbearably crushed', he writes, 'that I despaired of life itself; indeed, I felt as though I had received the sentence of death' (2 Corinthians 1.8-9). And a good part of the second letter to Corinth actually grows out of this experience; the brash, proud Corinthian church had wanted Paul to be a success story, and he had to explain to them that being an apostle, and ultimately being a Christian, was not a matter of being a success story, but of living with human failure — *and* with the God who raises the dead. That's what following Jesus is likely to involve.

The language Paul uses here is the language of depression. Depression is what happens when one particular little clutch of fears get together in a circle, and it forces us to go round and round the circle, worrying about one thing, which leads us to blame ourselves for the next thing, which leads us to be anxious about the third thing, which takes us conveniently back to the start of the circle, and round we go again. And one of the key features of depression is that we put ourselves on trial, produce lots of evidence for the prosecution and none for the defence, find ourselves guilty, and pronounce sentence. Paul says, 'I felt as if I had received the sentence of death.' That's exactly what depression is like.

Putting the evidence together, it seems that the component features of Paul's depression were two things. First, he ran into stiff opposition in Ephesus from local folk who didn't like the idea of this new religion and who did their best to make life

difficult for him. That he might have borne; but when he was physically at his lowest ebb (and depression regularly strikes when we are tired, or ill, or physically unfit) he heard that, secondly, one of his largest churches, the Corinthians themselves, had stabbed him in the back by embracing teachers, and teachings, that were leading them away from the truth of the gospel he had taught them.

So had he done it all wrong? Had he failed to teach them properly? Had he failed them, and failed God? Was he going to die under persecution, or in prison, knowing that his work was in ruins, that he'd been called to a unique mission and had just blown it? That, I suggest, was the circle, the treadmill of depression, which struck Paul somewhere in the mid-50s AD.

And, he says, this sudden crisis was to make him rely not on himself but on *the God who raises the dead*. Hadn't Paul been relying on this God before? Hadn't he believed before that God was the God who raises the dead? Of course he had. But somehow there was a new depth, a further level of his personality which the message of the gospel hadn't fully got through to before. In his Damascus Road experience he had quickly come to see that his life had been based on a mistake. It had been a humbling experience. But even with Paul the humiliation of the gospel took years to get through the different layers of the personality, and in Asia it finally hit a point that it doesn't seem to have reached earlier. He came to the utter end of his own resources; he heard and felt the sentence of death pronounced by the little voice of fear inside; and, he says, 'this was to make me rely on the God who raises the dead'. He had been following Jesus for years; now he realized what precisely it meant to follow the crucified and risen Lord. As a result, he was summoned to stop worrying about his own productivity, and to rely on the rushing mighty wind.

I don't want to give the impression that this new reliance is easy, something that anyone can just do by snapping his or her fingers and getting on with it. The whole point of what I'm saying is that it isn't like that; that we are so sunk in our habits of fear, and sometimes in the depressions or quasi-depressions which

those habits produce, that we find it enormously difficult, and often the work of years and even decades, to hear the gospel of the resurrection with what Sir Edward Elgar called 'our insidest inside'. What I am saying is that the message of the gospel, the message that the true God is the God who raises the dead, can and does go that deep; and that wherever you may be, and whenever you may hit that rock-bottom sense of despair, the gospel can reach you there too. Indeed, that is where it specializes in reaching people. It is when we are weak that we can be strong. When our strength comes to an end, that is when the life-giving wind of God starts to blow with new force.

Therefore, we are not to be surprised if living as Christians brings us to the place where we find we are at the end of our own resources, and that we are called to rely on the God who raises the dead. Living by faith rather than by fear is so odd for us, so scary for us, that it takes a lot of learning. Bit by bit we must open ourselves to the power of this resurrection God; and sometimes this will only happen when we find ourselves in the sudden crisis where there is nothing else that we can do. Don't be surprised if this happens, not least when you face an uncertain future. Use such an opportunity as the moment when your belief in the resurrection of Jesus, your trust in the God who raises the dead, your determination to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, reaches down one or two levels deeper into your own innermost being, the place where all those fears still live. It's alarming even to confront some of those fears. But until they hear the surprising command, which may only happen in a sudden crisis, they may never be able to turn themselves around from fear to faith.

I hope it's clear by now that the true God is a radically different God from the man-made monster who sits up on a cloud barking out a list of arbitrary commands. We have come back to the beginning of the gospel: either Jesus rose again from the dead or he didn't. If he didn't, then the whole Christian thing is a waste of time; as Paul says elsewhere, if Christ is not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (1 Corinthians 15.32). But if Jesus *did* rise again from the dead, then there is nothing ultimately

to be afraid of; as the Psalmist says, the God who has delivered my whole person from death will also deliver my eyes from tears and my feet from falling (Psalm 116.8). It is because Jesus reveals this God to us that we find ourselves called, at the deepest level of our being, to follow him.

All the other commands that enable us to make sense of our human life follow from this one. When we grasp at that which is not ours, it is because we are afraid that if we don't we won't have enough. When we use sex as a means of self-gratification rather than as the glorious affirmation of a lifelong commitment, we do so not just because of lust; lust itself is nurtured in fear, fear of rejection, fear of loneliness. When we lie, we do so because we are afraid that the truth will be embarrassing. And so on. And if we believe in the God who raised Jesus, then, as our fears are dealt with at a deeper and deeper level, as they are met by the astonishing love of the surpassing God, we will be able to leave behind the image of a bossy, bullying God who wants us to keep his laws in order to control us, to lick us into shape, to squash or stifle our humanness or our individuality. Instead, we will be able to follow the true God, the God who raises the dead, in trust rather than fear. The true God gives new life, deeper, richer life, and helps us towards full mature humanness, by prising open the clenched fists of our fears in order to give his own life and love into our empty and waiting hands.

If, then, we recognize the truth about the surpassing God, the God who raises the dead, we can trust him with every lesser task that may come our way. He can be trusted with exams; he can be trusted with jobs, even when they don't necessarily work out the way we thought they should. He can be trusted with marriage, both as we look forward to it with eagerness and trepidation and when we find ourselves within it and facing the stresses and strains that all contemporary marriages must expect. He can be trusted with money, even when it seems as though there is even less of it available than we had thought. He can be trusted with old age. He can be trusted with death itself. Of course he can; he is the God who raises the dead, who affirms the

goodness of human life, who takes precisely the situation where there seems no hope in human terms, and brings new life exactly there.

Our following of the Jesus who reveals this God to us is in line with the vocation of Israel at the end of the exile. Israel, in exile, perceived herself like a childless woman, in a society where that meant great shame; like a divorced woman, without family and without support. Israel was a nation taken over by others, confined to refugee status. This people had faced the sudden and supreme crisis of their whole nationhood. And to them the surpassing God revealed himself afresh, with the surprising command echoing through the prophetic oracles. This is the word of the God who raises the dead, and invites us to follow his risen Son in the new way of life:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear;  
burst into song and shout,  
you who have not been in labor!  
For the children of the desolate woman will be more  
than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.  
Enlarge the site of your tent . . . ;  
do not hold back; lengthen your cords  
and strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread out to the right and to the left,  
and your descendants will possess the nations,  
and will settle the desolate towns.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;  
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will  
remember no more.  
For your Maker is your husband,  
the Lord of hosts is his name,  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.

FOLLOWING JESUS

For the Lord has called you  
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,  
says your God.  
For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment  
I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

This is like the days of Noah to me:  
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
would never again go over the earth,  
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you,  
and will not rebuke you.  
For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.  
(Isaiah 54.1-10)

## The Mind Renewed

If it happened today, it would make instant headlines in the *Jerusalem Post*, and perhaps also in the *Washington Post*. 'SYRIAN GENERAL HEALED BY ISRAELI HOLY MAN.' Unthinkable? Yes: that's how it was regarded then as well. Syria and Israel have been slugging it out on and off for three thousand years, and this story is all about a very bemused but very grateful Syrian general discovering that there was a God in Israel who could do things that his local gods apparently couldn't do. His discovery points to the discovery waiting for all who want to follow Jesus: this journey will mean a complete renewal of the mind.

Perhaps you remember the story, which occurs in 2 Kings 5. The great general Naaman was suffering from some incurable skin disease, known loosely as leprosy. He was told that Elisha, the Jewish prophet, would heal him. He hoped for royal treatment: Elisha would surely come out and deal with him as one deals with a great man. What he got was the offhand style: Elisha sent a message telling him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. Initially he lost his temper and refused, until his servants made him see sense; he left his pride behind on the bank of the Jordan, and washed, and was cured.

It was at that point that Naaman realized that he had a new problem, and that's where the story really starts. We now have a tale of two muddled men, but muddled in very different ways.