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Dear Friends,

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

It feels like such a joyful greeting, although as Barry explores Mark's gospel below, we see it's not always instantly understood. When Jesus appeared after the resurrection, his friends didn't necessarily recognise him – Mary thought he was the gardener, the disciples on the road to Emmaus thought he was just another traveller.

As restrictions relax (at different rates in Wales, Scotland and England), I feel as though I am emerging from darkness into sunlight, and that my vision isn't quite as clear as it might be. As we understand better what our own "resurrection" looks like, we are going to need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus Christ. Different communities and different congregations will experience the post-Covid world in different ways, and we rural Christians need to stand ready to help each other, as well as our wider communities. Keep talking with your fellow Christians, whatever church they are part of, and keep being the light of Christ together in your community.

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This comes with my love and prayers for you all

Claire, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre

Ask a silly question

Bible readings

Isaiah 26:3-4

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.

Mark 12:18-27

Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?'

Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!'

Reflection

The Gospel reading this week brought to mind a visit I made in my youth (now many years ago) to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. The man to whom I gave my attention was speaking eloquently, explaining why the earth was saucer shaped. His argument had a certain logic; as he pointed out, it explained why the horizon was curved and why the sea did not run off the edge. I am sure that he was not serious, but he made his points enthusiastically and sounded convincing.

Had this speaker been serious, I'd have been justified in responding with the words of Jesus to the Sadducees: 'Are you in error because you do not know..? You are badly mistaken!' The Sadducees were a sect whose members were drawn from the upper classes of society and were closely associated with the priesthood and temple duties. But they did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection, so their question would not have been taken seriously beyond the fact that it might have been designed to reinforce their own beliefs, and ridicule those who believed differently.

There are many different philosophies and theories taught as if proven fact in order to explain who we are, how we got here, and why we are here. Some are supported to a degree by scientific evidence but, rather like the man espousing his theory that the world is saucer-shaped, there are some gaps in the knowledge and evidence base. But a similar argument is often made concerning the Bible.

The New Testament reading on which I am reflecting is accompanied by Psalm 135 and Isaiah 26:1-15 in the lectionary. Both the psalmist and the prophet make assertions about God that would refute both the philosophy of the Sadducees and those of our own time. The difference for Christians is that, while we may not possess all the answers, we are able to experience the reality of God in a relationship made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in and through that relationship that the words of the psalmist and prophet ring true. The gospel does not call for 'blind faith'. Rather, it calls for a faith that seeks knowledge and experience of God and his purpose for our lives.

For many rural churches across the denominations there are genuine and sincere questions about how things will be in the future. Much has changed during the past thirteen months. Questions remain regarding the survival of some church buildings. Much has been gained through taking churches services and other gatherings online. Many rural people have been experiencing church for the first time; will that be lost? What will the Christian presence in rural areas look like a year after the pandemic has ended?

The response that Jesus gave to the Sadducees drew attention to an inconsistency in their belief system. As I walked on from Hyde Park that Sunday, I wondered whether any in the audience had believed the well-reasoned and passionately argued theory about the saucer-shaped world. By contrast, those of us who 'know the

scriptures and the power of God” can say, ‘I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day’ (2 Timothy 1:12).

Prayer

Loving God, you call us to experience
your saving power and transforming grace.
In these times when many do not know whom to trust,
grant us confidence in what we have discovered
through faith in your word, so that by our words
supported by transformed lives,
we might help others to discover that our God,
the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.
Amen.

Response

In rural communities it is normal for our neighbours to know us well. It therefore behoves us to ensure that our lives bear witness to our faith. As we continue to live through uncertain times, let’s make sure that through sincere caring actions we demonstrate God’s love, and are ready, when opportunities present themselves, to give a reason for the hope that is within us, with gentleness and humility.

Revd Barry Osborne, CEO, Rural Mission Solutions