

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

SERVICE ON SUNDAY 12th April 2009

The Resurrection of the Jesus of History

By Iain Brown

We Unitarians are not just worshippers, we are thinkers too. So why bother thinking about the Resurrection? Don't we just not believe in the divinity of Jesus any more than in the divinity of any man or woman? Of course it did not happen! Even most orthodox Christians today do not believe it happened. So "Why bother?" I can hear you saying as you settle into anticipated boredom.

Actually I would say to you that a significant number of orthodox Christians do still believe that it happened in Jerusalem about this season in the year. So why do they believe and why do we not? Well, let us digress for a little.

In 2008 a Jewish scholar called Geza Vermes published a book tracing ideas of resurrection throughout the historical period of the Old and New Testaments. Jewish writers believed in an after death they called Sheol. It seems to have been imagined as a grey shadowy place where people became emptied and weakened shades who communicated with others in squeaks. You only lived once and you could concentrate on enjoying life while you could. Only a few very important people like the prophets Elijah and Elisha escaped death and were carried up in to heaven directly. A cult of suicidal martyrdom arose during the subjection of the Jewish people after the invasion in 168 BC by a Hellenistic king of Syria and Judea. The righteous, and especially those who gave their lives in defence of the culture and the religion, would dwell on the mountainside where God had his throne and the wicked would suffer eternal torture in the fires of Gehenna. Sometimes this was seen as bodily survival and sometimes it was imagined as purely spiritual. This was probably the first emergence of a theology of the last times and eternal life foreshadowing the eschatology of the New Testament. But, by the time of Jesus, only the Pharisees believed in bodily resurrection and these were almost entirely confined to the cities and especially to Jerusalem.

In so far as we can believe the words of the Gospels (and most scholars today would argue that we can only believe in limited matters), it seems that the words put into the mouth of Jesus and the acts ascribed to him said very little about a resurrection. There might have been one or two miraculous resuscitations but these were not resurrections. But then, almost all present day biblical scholars are agreed that the Epistles of Paul which strongly preached a resurrection were written before the Gospels and it would be difficult to show that Paul's ideas were not circulating in written or verbal form and did not influence what was written in the Gospels.

Let me quote Geza Vermes here: "Paul is adamant (that) without belief in the resurrection, primarily the resurrection of Christ, his preaching is baseless, the Christians are misled by him and their faith is futile. In those circumstances one would justifiably expect to find in the teachings of Jesus, as handed down in the Gospels, numerous references to the raising of the dead and to his own resurrection. Those who labour under such an illusion must brace themselves for a big surprise. General pronouncements by Jesus on resurrection are few and far between. Allusions to his rising can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and, when scrutinised with critical eyes, they turn out to be inauthentic."

In a nutshell the problem with authenticity is that in three of the Gospels Jesus is made to predict with crystal clarity his own death and resurrection. Jesus' apparent predictions are clearly based on Jewish prophecies about a messiah that were well known to every Jew of his day. But each time he does it, his followers are depicted as not understanding, being puzzled, keeping it to themselves. The women who allegedly went to his empty grave are even depicted as having forgotten any prediction! If these predictions were authentic then, as Vermes suggests, the arrest, crucifixion and resurrection must have seemed dead certainties. Yet the Gospel stories present them as unexpected, perplexing and incomprehensible to his followers. In this total self contradiction something must be wrong! It is more likely that the dishonourable behaviour of the apostles in running away and denying any association with him is genuine and that the predictions were added in later to make the events seem to be the will of God.

The contradictions between the Gospel stories of the resurrection are notorious. The number and identity of the women who visit the tomb in the various Gospels varies from one, through three to several including unnamed legions of women from Galilee. The

number of persons seen at the tomb varies from one angel to two men and the number and places of the apparitions vary from one woman in Jerusalem; through two disciples at Emmeaus; one man, Peter, in Jerusalem; all the apostles in Jerusalem; all the apostles on a mountain in Galilee and seven apostles at the sea of Tiberias. Jesus was never identified. He was seen as the gardener, as a stranger and as a ghost. The ascension takes place in Jerusalem; in Bethany and on the Mount of Olives and at various times such as Easter Sunday; forty days later; or six weeks later.

With so many clashing witnesses, the evidence of the empty tomb would never have been accepted in a Jewish court, Vermes asserts. There are at least six alternative explanations of the empty tomb, although none of them are wholly satisfactory. None of the apparitions appeared to anyone outside the circle of his immediate disciples and believers so there are no independent witnesses. If Jesus had been moving around eating drinking and socialising as a normal human being we can be fairly certain that the Sanhedrin and the Romans would have been very interested because they thought they had killed him. There is no evidence that this was ever so.

It may seem, then, that the bodily resurrection of the person, Jesus, is highly unlikely - even when supported by evidence put together some forty to fifty years afterwards in support of the growing tradition within the earliest church and especially driven by the white hot claims of Paul.

As we saw earlier, Paul is the real protagonist of the claims of resurrection. For Paul the resurrection of the Christ, in whatever form, was a key part, even the centrepiece, of the story he presented to the world. Jesus, the man's, resurrection was for Paul the promise of universal resurrection and of eternal life and of the salvation bought by the Christ on the cross. His resurrection was only a stage in his elevation to the right hand of God in heaven and his final triumph. But although, as a Pharisee, Paul believed in some kind of bodily resurrection he always maintained that the resurrected body was not the same as the original body. As Vermes describes it, the risen body would be "imperishable, glorious and powerful, bearing the image, not of the mortal Adam but that of the glorified Christ." The raised dead would have their earthly bodies transformed into spiritual ones. So just as in the twenty first century millions of evangelical Christians in America believe in the imminent second coming and the rapture that will follow it before they die, so then, two

thousand years before, the early Christians looked forward to the imminent second coming, the parousia as the theologians call it, and expected not to die.

We are left with some form of spiritual resurrection as the only possible explanation for the role that the resurrection of Jesus the man might have played in the massive magnification of Jesus the man into the Christ, the God. So what on earth can we mean by 'spiritual resurrection'?

Let us begin with the obvious, perhaps the bathetic: in this post-enlightenment science-led twenty first century almost seventy percent of the general population believe in ghosts. A substantial number believe in the conjuring up of spirits. The believers in the divinity of the Christ-man will rise up in their legions here and cry "How dare you suggest that the risen Christ was a common or garden ordinary ghost!" Oh, dear, sorry. I was only looking at the possibilities. Admittedly much of what passes for evidence of the resurrection seems to suggest that what people were seeing was something like a ghost. I do not know much about ghosts but my impression is that they are supposed to hang around for a very long time – like from Elizabethan times at least – and they are generally associated with particular locations. You might expect that such a powerful personality as Jesus the man would produce a ghost that would hang around for centuries in Galilee or Jerusalem, most probably around the Mount of Olives. But there is no sign and there have never been any reports. So the Christ-believers can, I guess, relax.

So what light might our contemporary knowledge and experience of the bereavement process throw on the alleged 'spiritual resurrection'? Well, we do know from large studies in London and elsewhere that it is very important for the bereaved (especially husbands and wives) to be able to keep an image of the bereaved person in their minds and that, if that is lost, much greater distress follows. We also know that it is widespread and perfectly normal for the bereaved to talk to their lost ones every day and often for long periods of time. We also know that many people experience a strong sense of the continuing presence of the lost one, sometimes lasting for years. Some bereft people take over the values, sometimes the life work and sometimes the personality of the lost person. The expression from Paul 'is dead and is yet alive' points to a very, very common phenomenon. In a very important sense the dead do live on in many of us, usually in a benign way but sometimes also, most distressingly, in a malign way.

So, after the death of the man, Jesus, did he live on in his immediate followers. For a man who appeared to make a deep and powerful impression, that would almost certainly be so, at least to begin with - and perhaps for their lifetimes.

We also know that bereavement is usually a process of mourning and then re-organisation, either renouncing the needs of the mourner that the dead person ministered to, or finding a substitute or substitutes. This rings true with the reports in the gospels of a devastated and wholly disorganised group left in Jerusalem (or was it Galilee as more recent scholars have come to think?) after the death, probably compounded by guilt, a not uncommon accompaniment of mourning today. We know that there are some ways in which grief can turn from helplessness, depression and disorganisation into positive feelings. One way is into anger but there does not seem to be much evidence of that around the death of Jesus the man. But another important way of 'turning' grief is into action, sometimes frantic and futile action as when a widow will tour the world. But this turning of grief into action is more often into action directed and inspired by the values of the lost person. It is this latter that seems to have happened with the early followers of Jesus, the man. The re-empowerment and restoration of confidence that is ascribed to the descent of the Holy Ghost seems a likely part of the bereavement process, the recovery of some kind of security and the beginnings of re-organisation of life without the lost one.

But, I am going to argue that, however powerful the impact of any single personality, it is very rare for that impact to be sustained directly and vividly over more than two generations. Yes, for many powerfully charismatic people with wide social, political or intellectual or aesthetic influence, the legend lives on after the death and the values are taken up and sustained by others, but still the name tends to fade. It may take a hundred years or two to fade but fade it does. That is unless there is a personality cult, an idealisation, a whole hagiography.

The biographies of saints, the hagiographies as they are somewhat dismissively called by sceptics like me and you, should be studied, the process, miracles and all, legends of spectacular compassion, courage, obedience and self sacrifice, by which an ordinary person is built up into a minor deity are still at work today. They can be seen in the processes of canonisation in the Roman church. I think we can clearly see that happening

two thousand years ago already between the preaching of Paul and the writings of the gospels.

In the gospels we see the process through which Jesus, the man, is being built up into Jesus the God. As many scholars have already concluded, these gospels were a mixture of some remote representation of truth about the man and propaganda, but they were predominantly propaganda. "See what an amazing guy this Jesus was" was directed at a first century audience who believed in miracles and much else.

Much more important than the man, in my view were what Richard Dawkins calls the Memes, the ideas and values (for example values of justice and compassion) that generate new ideas, like genes generate new physical bodies. And these memes were conveyed through the gospels and the writings of Paul to a Roman and Hellenistic civilisation which, from our point of view today, very badly needed them. In that sense, Jesus the man was, I believe one of the great teachers, different from, yet possibly greater than, Socrates because Socrates, interested in the value of truth, enjoyed the support of Alcibiades and some of the most powerful men in Athens until they lost power, whereas Jesus, more interested in values of justice and compassion, was a true wandering peasant teacher with the might of both the Sanhedrin and the Roman Empire entirely against what he stood for and with no powerful patrons. Very likely the values embodied in the myth of Jesus the man were more important in the spread of Christianity in the early days of the church than the personal impact of the man himself. What Jesus the man stood for before Paul made him into Jesus the Christ, the God, is a matter for another day than today.

So we have ancient beliefs in resurrection but we also have modern beliefs in resurrection. Perhaps the best example is the church of Elvis Presley. It still exists, not just in Las Vegas and Tennessee. Over several years since his death, you may have noticed, papers have reported sightings of the magic man himself. There used to be more than one web-site which recorded these. There is only one now. I can give you the reference. Elvis had a huge personal impact on the culture of the USA and therefore of the Western World. He has the advantage over Jesus the man in that his recordings will continue to be available over several more decades. So Elvis is not dead and from time to time he is reported as being seen in unexpected places. After the death of Diana I was fully expecting the same phenomena but they have never appeared. Does the birth and fading of new icons (minor

Gods and Goddesses) proceed at such a pace that Jade Goody is now gone in a few months when it took Diana a year or two disappear off the popular radar? These 'iconic' people need to be understood on a different plane, the plane of fantasy and myth just as I believe it is most probable that Jesus the man came to become Jesus the Christ, an almost wholly mythical figure in a different age. None of them, however have had the fortune (or is it misfortune?) to be linked to a theorist and organiser of the calibre of Paul so no enduring church will emerge from them.

So is there a psychological explanation of such phenomena? There are usually several. Well, there is a very dominant wish among those of us who enjoy life, not to die. Anything which suggests we do not, is heavily invested with the motivation to believe it is true. Another factor is that at a certain stage in our emotional development we need role models to imitate and to guide us in making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Often these embody the best of what we could be and want to be, are our heroes and heroines. These heroes and heroines are the personalised vehicles, the non-abstract corporeal embodiments, of the values we will strive for as mature adults. So at least for a while, fantasy people become very important to many of us. I think of Albert Schweitzer, Jean Paul Sartre, Bernard Russell and others of my youth. They were real to me and yet they were fantasy. I never met them, discovered they had a bad temper or told white lies. For a while, at least, we live in emotional safety. These fantasy figures are far enough away to be unlikely to seduce us, even if we rise and scream in masses, as for the Beatles. We do not have to live with their personal foibles. In the example of Jesus the man, we do not have to witness the cursing of the fig tree. These fantasy people allow the build up of idealisation – almost in the mirror image of the process of demonization which, as we know, is commonly the preliminary to atrocities and war.

The belief in the resurrection of Jesus the man which is one of the foundations of the belief in Jesus the Christ, the God should never surprise us. But it does not mean that we have to be a part of it and it should not divert us from the values of compassion and justice that came from Jesus the man. They are deeply entrenched in our Western post Christian humanist civilisation.

There are two other fascinating stories of the development of early Christianity which we need not cover in depth today but which we should be aware of as hovering in the background.

For much of my adult life I believed in what I shall call here 'the Chinese Whispers theory' of the development of early Christian thought and belief between the death of Jesus, the man, and the putting of pen to paper in the writing of the gospels and the bulk of the New Testament. Back in the 1930's repeated experiments in the labs at the University of Cambridge recorded how the telling of a tale from one to another through several people changed the story to emerge at the end. They were a classic demonstration of how selective memory is, picking up only what it understands and fits in with the experience of the rememberer; of how creative memory can be, filling in the gaps of what the rememberer does not understand with narrative which makes sense to them in the context of their culture and existing understanding and beliefs. This was how I believed early Christianity developed as tales of Christ were handed on over some seventy years from person to person in an oral tradition before they were written down

Recently, much more has become understood about the context within which earliest Christianity developed. The influence of the worship forms and practices of the synagogues of the first century within which the Jesus stories were conveyed to the faithful of the synagogue sitting in the body of the building and to the gentiles in the galleries is now seen as much more important than previously. After a spell of sharing of stories and explanations there had to be a split between the continuing orthodox Jews and the Jews who went with the Christian story. These last were joined by the gentiles (perhaps from the galleries of the synagogues) who also went with the story so that together they formed the separate Christian Church.

One of the fascinating possibilities to emerge from these studies is that the death of Jesus the man was not at Easter at all but much more likely in the Autumn at the Jewish festival of Succoth. But, of course, as we know, the Christian church took over the pagan festival of spring and the turn of the year into summer and moved the date of the alleged death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ from autumn into spring. But all these fascinating tales are for another day.

To return to the resurrection, the more sophisticated post-enlightenment Christian does not believe in the corporeal resurrection of Jesus the man any more than we Unitarians do. Writers like Bishop Spong and Marcus Borg believe in a spiritual resurrection. So what they do believe in is the myth of the special person – the ‘spiritual resurrection’ and, hence, the divinity of the Christ, the salvation of mankind through him, the resurrection of the faithful to eternal life and perhaps, but not necessarily, all the corrupting apparatus of the bureaucracy of salvation as dispensed through an organised church.

Along with the myth of the special person comes the idealisation of Jesus the man. The internalised God, the Holy Ghost they believe in only comes after conversion or salvation and it is a distinctly Jesus-shaped God-within. This is in contrast to ‘that of God in every man’ the Hindu ‘Tat Tvam Asi’ that we may tend to accept.

As a small boy of about six, I read the story of Androcles and the Lion. This is the story of how Androcles was out hunting when he heard a lion making a terrible noise. He soon realised it was in severe pain. He traced it to a cave on the hillside and after listening to it for a while he crept in great fear and trepidation and pulled a great thorn from its foot. Later as Androcles hunted he would be presented by the lion with gifts of prey killed for him. That story made a lasting impression on me, so much so that when my daughters asked me for a bed time story and demanded that it be made up (not read) as daughters do, I often told them the story of Androcles and the lion.

I am going to find this difficult to express but I shall try. That story was the myth of the man that personified the values of courage and compassion. Much later when I came to study Plato, I was expressing my appreciation of his theory of values when the professor in the tutorial asked me, did I not see the need for a personification of these values because values only became real when they were lived in real people. That professor was a well known Christian and I knew immediately that he was referring to Jesus as the personification of the good.

On reflection, even at that time, I rejected that suggestion. I rejected it because if Androcles was my personification of the values of courage and compassion then it limited my understanding of those values. The one concrete form of courage demonstrated in Androcles did not take in all the other forms of courage that I later came to know. People

and stories are conveyors of values, and useful ones too, but if they are confined to one story or one example or one person they lose the richness that comes from drawing on many examples. It is only when we form abstract notions of these values that they become truly adult values and can be diversified by adding to them from many origins and can be applied with clarity to many new situations.

To put it another way, what I am trying to say is that just as there are fundamentalists believers in the literal truth of the scriptures so also there single-source moralists. All these values come from one source, usually the scriptural Jesus. Just as the fundamentalists need a single guide to living in the scriptures so these people need a single authoritative source of what is good. They have the same simplistic mentality as the fundamentalists. As an adolescent I used to know many of them. I called it the 'fuehrer mentality', not after the Nazis who referred everything to the touchstone of what the great leader said and did in the same way, but because the word 'fuehrer' means leader and for them every dilemma is referred to the leader, the Jesus-ideal.

As a wide-ranging free-thinking Unitarian I believe that is an adolescent mentality, an immature mind which still needs a role model and, in a confusing world, adopts a single model for simplicity and security, a model which can seriously impoverish it. Unitarians do not have a fuehrer pattern of thinking and are notoriously difficult to lead, like herding cats as the well known phrase goes. And long may they remain so.