

READING | John 3.1-7

A reading from the first letter of John.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL: Luke 24.36b-48**Alleluia**

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Alleluia

While the eleven and their companions were talking about what they had heard, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

Sermon for 14th April 2024

"Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs, "It is more magic." They looked round.

There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.

"Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" asked Lucy.

"Not now," said Aslan.

“You’re not – not a - ?” asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn’t bring herself to say the word *ghost*. Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

“Do I look it?” he asked.

“Oh, you’re real, you’re real! Oh, Aslan!” cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.

That is not, admittedly, the Gospel for this morning. But those of you with sharp ears may have detected certainly similarities in the two texts. The mention of the name “Aslan” has probably given the game away. Yes, that is a scene from C.S. Lewis’ novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. I was reminded of it by this morning’s reading – that, I must admit, is one the risks of reading a lot of C.S. Lewis, you end up with the Bible reminding you of Narnia, rather than the other way round. But it did cause me to remember that passage, because of a slightly odd word in both of them. Not the broiled fish, though that’s a very interesting detail. But both discuss the resurrection by using the word “ghost”. At least, the Bible uses that word, and *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* specifically says that Susan couldn’t herself to say the word, but in the process the narrator uses it.

When Lewis came to write his story about the lion Aslan dying and rising again, he did not take everything in his story from the Bible. Aside from anything else, and I have this on the authority of the Church Fathers, Jesus was not a lion. (And that actually does provide some notable theological questions, as Rowan Williams comments in one of his books.) In Narnia there is the Stone Table instead of the Cross, there is the shaving of the mane rather than the crowning with thorns, and so on. The resurrection happens after one night rather than three days. There are a lot more talking mice involved than I remember from the Gospels. But in this scene, there is still that detail: that the people to whom Jesus (or Aslan) appeared thought for a second he might be a ghost. It obviously struck Lewis as important enough to keep as an incidental fact in the story. I suspect I know why, and it might help illuminate some of the meaning of this Gospel passage.

I think, and this is only my reading of the text, that Lewis saw the mention of ghosts as safeguarding against two of the great heresies in Christianity. “Heresy” is a rather dramatic word, but it generally means a version of Christian belief which fails to do justice to God.

It's a twisting of the truth. And the mention that people might have thought Jesus was a ghost or spirit, and he denied this specifically, pushes back against two mistaken understandings of Jesus and what he did.

Firstly, there is the docetic heresy – the idea that Jesus was not really human the way you and I are human. He had a human form, and he walked and talked as if he were a human. But really he was a sort of heavenly spirit, a spiritual being who had taken on the appearance of a person and so when he died his real self simply parted from the shell and he returned to heaven. That probably sounds a fairly weird notion to hear in a twenty-first century church. People two thousand years ago were more comfortable believing that all sorts of spirits surrounded them.

So you've probably never heard that heresy expressed in those terms. But you may well have heard a kind of Christianity which veers in that direction. When the faith becomes too other-worldly, when it stresses Jesus' uniqueness at the expense of his connection to us. When Jesus is spoken about almost as if he did not undergo real pain or suffering, as if he did not have the natural bonds of family and affection, or was never truly tempted. This is one kind of error about Christ.

The other heresy I think this passage wards off is Socinianism. This is the theory that Jesus was the most remarkable human in history, who provided enlightened teachings to his disciples and an example for moral conduct – but that he was not divine. This one you do actually hear in the modern world, though it is less common in the church than it used to be: it was one of the characteristic mistakes of Victorian liberalism. From this point of view, Jesus is our best option for religious teaching, was very probably directly inspired by God, and is an excellent person to model your life on. What it doesn't do, however, is say that Jesus was God. It doesn't say that Jesus' death actually did anything, that anything changed in humanity when he rose again. Because, of course, this theology says he didn't rise again. When this Jesus died, he simply went to the afterlife as we all will. Perhaps he did appear to some disciples, the way some people have experiences of the ghosts of departed loved ones. Perhaps the Bible says it as a powerful metaphor for the continuing presence of Jesus' teaching and example.

Both these errors seem to me to be ruled out by the mention of ghosts. Jesus is definite in the passage that he has hands and feet, that he can eat fish. He is not an otherworldly spirit who only appeared to be human. Neither is he the posthumous shade of an inspiring teacher. It took some time for the theological principles of Christianity to be worked out. Theology, after all, is the intellectual and rational reaction to the revelation of the saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

It comes afterwards, as a way to understand, to make sense, and to worship. It was to passages like this that the Church returned over the years when arguing about whether Docetism or Sabellianism was the correct way to think about Jesus, or whether they were heresies.

It might not seem immediately to matter. But there are reasons why getting our theology correct – or getting as adequate an account as we can of the outlines of the mystery – is worth doing. Docetism, believing Jesus to be an otherworldly spirit might seem merely silly. But it might also encourage us to have a faith which despises the physical world, because Jesus was never part of it. It might harden us to human suffering, because our job is to escape the world, not help it. It might draw us into exploiting or despising the created world. On the other side, Sabellianism, believing Jesus to be a great moral teacher and nothing more, might seem perfectly rational. But it could limit our vision, making solidarity with other people into our supreme religious value. It could turn “humanity” into an object of worship, and substitute a system of social justice for faith.

The Church does not spend valuable time thinking about heresy and orthodoxy because it wants a tidy answer and a tick. It does so because there are consequences for failing to make our faith coherent and rational. One is the lopsided religious worlds I’ve just suggested. Another is that if we cannot explain it to ourselves, we cannot explain it to others – we lose the ability to be “witnesses to these things”, as Jesus says in the reading. But most seriously, we put at risk that moment which Lewis describes in his Narnia as the girls burying their faces in Aslan’s mane. That moment of delighted recognition, and reverent encounter, as we discern the face of Jesus Christ.

Amen.