

We are in the season of resurrection, as Toby's reminded in the most recent Benefice Bulletin. The passage from Acts shows how important the raising of Jesus from the dead was in the proclamation of the early Church, and our Gospel reading gives us the second half of Luke's post-resurrection account, following the much-loved story of the walk to Emmaus. There is, of course, a problem for the preacher on the Resurrection, and indeed for all of us. The four Gospels give very different accounts of what happened following the Easter resurrection. They don't just tell different stories; they contradict each other, both about timings and locations. Apart from asserting that the first witnesses of the resurrection were women—in the case of John, one woman, Mary Magdalene—and that they found the tomb empty, at first sight there is hardly anything else they have in common. Adding to the confusion, the first account of the post-resurrection appearances is not in the Gospels, but in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written in about AD 55, 20-25 years after Jesus's death, and between 15 and 45 years before the Gospels were written. Paul wrote "*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received,*" and he goes on to list the appearances; they bear little resemblance to any of the Gospel stories: an appearance to James, then to 500 disciples at one time, no mention of the women, no mention of the empty tomb. Often the preacher simply ignores these problems, and preaches on the particular text given, and ignores the other Gospels. For example, today, in Luke the whole post-resurrection story is packed into Easter day, and. If we read on, it ends with the Ascension on the same evening, and not forty days later. But I think we do those to whom we are talking a disservice if we don't consider what the Gospels, taken together, tell us.

It's not just a problem with the post-resurrection story. We all know we have two versions of the nativity, from Matthew and Luke, which have virtually nothing in common. Even the crucifixion stories have significant differences about what was said, what was done and when it happened.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised. The Gospels were written well after Good Friday and Easter, between 40 and 70 years after, and in that time, the stories will have been told and retold in all the early church communities that grew up far beyond Jerusalem. The people

in each community who had witnessed the resurrection would have had their own memories and their own stories and would have shared these, feeling no need to write them down until those first witnesses started to die, and a written record became necessary if the stories were not be forgotten. It's hardly surprising that these would differ.

But much more significant is not how they differ, but what they all have in common.

First, they none of them represented Jesus as a glorious heavenly being, as might have been expected from the OT tradition. There's no repeat of the Transfiguration; no shining figures or voices from heaven. Jesus appears in human form; he walks and talks with his disciple; he can be touched, even if sometimes they are warned not to. He even eats with them.

Second Jesus comes unbidden. They don't ask or pray to see him; he comes when he wills, and goes when he wills as well.

Third, in nearly all the stories there is a problem of recognition. Mary Magdalene thinks he is the gardener, the couple from Emmaus don't recognise him till he breaks the bread. In today's Gospel, they think he is a ghost, and some go on doubting right to the end.

Fourth, despite his human form, in no way is he a dead body revived. That is what Lazarus and Jairus's daughter were, and one must assume that they will both have had to go through the tedious experience of dying for a second time. Jesus is raised in human form but his is a resurrection body, as, we hope and believe, eventually ours will be as well.

And fifth and finally, in every story Jesus provides significant guidance and instruction. Today he explains the scriptures to them, as he did on the road to Emmaus. Mary Magdalene is instructed to tell the disciples. Peter is told to 'feed my sheep'. And so on.

It is all these shared, surprising aspects of the four Gospel stories, which I don't think anyone would have invented, that lead me to accept them as a faithful witness of the truth of the resurrection.

We may have the same five experiences in various ways in our own lives. Our experience of God and Jesus do differ considerably. There are those who have had a road-to-Damascus or mountain-top

experience, but plenty of us haven't. We may experience God in our prayer life or in worship, or in seeing the hand of God at work in our lives, but perhaps only afterwards when the whole pattern can be seen. That was my own experience in my teaching career. But to us today, however we experience Jesus he comes as God but also as man; he comes when he wills to, perhaps when we least expect him. We too may have difficulty in recognising him, at least until afterwards. He comes as the resurrected Lord, and he comes with guidance and instruction, if we are prepared to listen. The first disciples' experience of the resurrection, however confused and confusing it may seem, is the same resurrection experience that is available to us. May we be able to say, like the Church down the ages: Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!