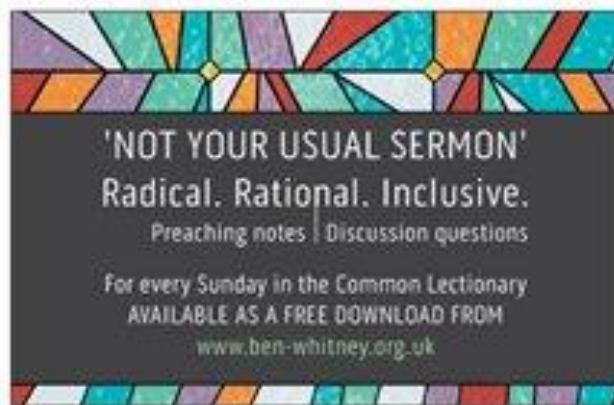


'NOT YOUR USUAL SERMON'

Radical. Rational. Inclusive.

Preaching notes and discussion questions for the Christian Year



SAMPLE: Easter Sunday

April 21st 2019

BEN WHITNEY

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These Notes may be copied and circulated for your own use without charge but please ensure the footer is retained. Feedback is always welcome via my website above.

Each week contains my own 3 key themes, a 1300 word reflection on the passages from the Common Lectionary, a key quote and 3 questions for discussion.

‘NOT YOUR USUAL SERMON’: RADICAL. RATIONAL. INCLUSIVE.

I hope these thoughts will be an encouragement to those who are unconvinced by conventional Christian beliefs but who are still hanging on to following the Way of Jesus. I don't underestimate how challenging, and even lonely, a place that can be. They are the 10 minute 'virtual' sermons that I would have preached myself, given the opportunity, but which may also help you to say or to 'hear' something different this year. They could also be used for personal reflection, if you have no suitable church group to share them with. While I have a postgraduate Theology degree, and was a Baptist Minister and then a C of E Reader for almost 20 years, I am only now feeling my own way back into attending any church after many years away – not in the wilderness, but just getting on with work and family life. I have no role other than as an irregular participant wherever I am made to feel welcome. You too are very welcome to share in the journey.

I have six general principles in my approach:

- All religious concepts and ideas, including those about 'God' are made up of human language, poetry and metaphorical comparisons, not 'literal' descriptions. So we can, and must, change them as new understandings arise.
- Following 'The Way of Jesus' is my sole focus. 'Seeking the kingdom' is all about how to live, now. But we only have his life and teaching at second-hand, 'according to' those who wrote about it later, not his 'actual' words.
- The Bible was written by particular groups and individuals in particular times and places over hundreds of years. It is interesting, often thought-provoking, worth studying because of its influence, but I don't always have to agree with it.
- As all things religious come from inside each of us using our human faculties and intellectual powers, not from a supernatural 'Other', 'faith' must be rational, not require us to set aside everything else we know to be true first.
- No question cannot be asked; no belief or Creed can go unchallenged, no doctrine is beyond dispute. We need a wholly new C21st vocabulary if anyone is going to take any notice, not the repetition of now outdated ideas.
- The Christian community must be inclusive, outward-looking and experimental, as Jesus was. Everyone has an equal place whatever their gender, sexuality, race, ability, class or status. Beliefs do not all have to be the same to belong.

This is a sample for Easter Sunday, 21st April 2019 to give an idea of my general style. The first full set, covering Pentecost (June 9th) to the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (August 25th) will be available to download FREE from my website after Easter.

EASTER SUNDAY

April 21st 2019

Isaiah 65: 17-25 Acts 10: 34-43 John 20: 1-18

MY KEY THEMES

- What does it mean to say that Jesus is 'alive'?
- What do the Bible narratives tell us (and not tell us)?
- Today is about the reality of Jesus' death, and yet.....

If the radical follower of the Way of Jesus had nothing positive to say on this of all days, then she would be missing out on a crucial opportunity. I will affirm that 'He is risen indeed' at some point today. Whether others around me will all believe the same thing as me is another question, but this is a statement that clearly has to mean something real, not just be repeated for the sake of it. So what do I mean? That the Jesus story did not end on Good Friday. Or rather, one story about him ended and another one began. But the Jesus who we can meet, if only 'according to' the gospel writers, should be our focus, far more than the 'Christ' of Paul and the later Christian tradition,

Easter Day this year is the day before the anniversary of when my father died, very suddenly, in 1977. His life ended then, aged just 58. But his influence, even his presence, has continued in my own life right up to the present day. Indeed he has had more impact on who I am since he died than he did before. I consciously chose to study theology, and even to become a Baptist Minister like him (for a while) because, at the time, I felt a sense of his unfinished business. I have his well-thumbed and frequently underlined copies of both the Greek New Testament, and '*The True Wilderness*' by Harry Williams. He lives again for me when I read them.

My father was a keen supporter of the World Council of Churches, and during my later ministerial training I went to a WCC student Conference in Geneva. I acquired there a book which shows a range of artistic images of the crucifixion from across the world, some more grimly realistic than others. There had been great excitement in 1968 when a stone chest from a cemetery near Jerusalem was found to contain the remains of a man crucified around the first century CE. They tell us how it was done; the deliberately prolonged death; the nails through the wrists (not the hands) etc. They were not the bones of Jesus, but what if they had been?

If some archaeologist were to prove, beyond all possible dispute, that human remains found in an ancient cave just outside the old city of Jerusalem, were definitely those of one Jesus of Nazareth, called King of the Jews by Pilate and crucified about 30CE, would we still have anything to celebrate today? Of course. According to the gospels an empty tomb was not enough to convince anyone that he was alive. So would an intact undisturbed tomb disprove it? No. It's not about a dead man walking: it's about a dead man *living*. The stories, written down between about 45 and 65 years later, do not even claim to describe any actual moment of resurrection; they only describe the effect on those who now believed that Jesus was still with them.

But there were no eye-witnesses who say 'I was there' when the stone rolled away. There probably wasn't even a tomb; the story of Joseph of Arimathea having one available seems highly contrived to modern ears. The body of Jesus was almost certainly left to rot in anonymity on the rubbish dump of Golgotha. That's what happens when others die unjustly today as he did. Jesus is no different. He was not some special case to be given a decent burial. He 'descended into hell' as millions of others have done since, many of whom also never had a proper grave. (See for e.g. *Through Mud and Barbed Wire* about two great theologians who were on opposite sides of a WW1 battle): www.mel-thompson.co.uk/index.html

Jesus was remembered as saying 'It is finished' and that he died in despair, feeling abandoned by his friends, and even by his God. It was over. He did not 'cheat death' or die only in the human part of him, whatever that means. He really died, or more accurately, he was killed, murdered. And not because the whole thing was a put up job between him and the 'Father' with the happy ending of resurrection already agreed in advance. This cold hard reality of death is what happens so often when goodness confronts the worst of what human beings can do to each other. The good often suffer when the powerful seek to overcome the powerless because they are threatened by them, just as it was with Pilate.

What happened after that is told in a series of individual stories which vary according to who we are talking about. They cannot all be reconciled into one continuous narrative; there are inherent contradictions about what kind of experience it was. This conviction that Jesus was alive, but now in a different way, came only to those who had been with him before. (The supposed mass encounters can only be later legend). Jesus 'met' with those who had known and loved him, albeit often inadequately. His friends told of this new understanding in the only way they could. It was *as if* he had walked from the tomb and been with them again. That was a genuinely 'real' event for them, if not 'literally' true.

We cannot know him exactly as they did. We weren't there. But I think we can still learn from their experience. Mary his real mother, broken with grief and yet restored. Mary Magdalene, in some accounts the first to see what was going on, before any of the men. (No surprise there!) Peter, still failing and yet forgiven, despite, in John's own theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus, never actually promising the deep *agape* love that Jesus asks for, only a lesser sense of being his friend. (You have to go to John's Greek to see the point that *he* is making). Thomas, unconvinced until he sees the scars that prove Jesus is really dead, etc. Now Jesus' life can carry on in them. Mostly it's about them finding 'healing'; the same Greek word as being 'saved'. And so the second story begins. But where has it taken us? Perhaps a very long way from Jesus and his friends.

The language of an atoning sacrifice, and of our eternal 'salvation' as a result, makes no sense to me. It makes all the human players just puppets acting out God's hidden plan. It leaves the real Jesus behind and replaces him with a 'Christ', not even the 'Messiah' that he may have seen himself to be. Although Paul, for example, apparently met up with Peter, he shows no knowledge of Jesus' journey to the cross. For Paul Jesus was 'designated' as God's 'Son' *only* because he was 'raised' (Romans 1:4). He had no interest in his birth, life or even his teaching. Thankfully, it's the later gospel writers that push his significance back, first to his baptism (Mark), then his conception (Matthew/Luke) and even to the beginning of time (John). The gospels are *not* biographies; they are reflections on the life of Jesus, looking back about two generations later. They must be handled with care. But they take us as close as we can get to the human person he was. I could not manage to know Jesus at all without them; well, the first three anyway!

Orthodox Christianity does not come from Jesus himself. He was not 'a Christian'! We have to keep a firm hold on the actual human Jesus and not focus so much on the cosmic Christ who became the hero of the second story. We have to recover what we can of the healer, prophet and teacher who spoke of seeking the ways of the kingdom, not so much about himself. Because that's our mission too if we are walking in his Way. This same Jesus is the one who lives. The Jesus who challenged the established religion of his day and included those whom others ignored. This is the Jesus who we now proclaim as alive, not some other semi-divine Being. It means looking around us for the signs that goodness can overcome all the terrible things we can sometimes do to one another, here and now. Human cruelty killed him, but he lives. Not because he was God; that wouldn't help us. But because he was one of us. The victory belongs to the way of Jesus, even though living like that killed him. That's the Easter paradox. Death does not have the final say. 'Love wins' (Rob Bell).

We are offered a path to life in all its fullness, here and now, by sharing in this death. It changes how we live. 'By his stripes we are healed'. Like others before and since, Jesus died young, in a most vicious and violent way, perhaps in deliberately chosen solidarity with the prophets and recent Jewish martyrs. How do we deal with that reality and with other deaths like it? Saying that we are Jesus' people is saying not that he *died for us* but that he *lives through us*; not up in heaven watching, but here on earth working; where there is yet hope that his vision of a better world, like Isaiah's prophecy hundreds of years before, might just become reality if we can see it ourselves and help others to see it too.

I don't know if my father would agree with any of this. But I sense him looking over my shoulder; his eyes twinkling and his pipe going out, again!

KEY QUOTE

If some archaeologist were to prove, beyond all possible dispute, that human remains found in an ancient cave just outside the old city of Jerusalem, were definitely those of one Jesus of Nazareth, called King of Jews by Pilate and crucified about 30CE, would we still have anything to celebrate today? Of course.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- What does it mean to you to say that Jesus is 'alive'? How would you explain it to someone who needs to understand it all in a non-supernatural, rational way?
- How does the Easter story relate to contemporary stories about good people being persecuted and even killed for doing what was right? If Easter isn't about that, is it about anything worthwhile at all?
- Is there someone special who 'lives' in you and sustains your human journey? Share the story if you feel comfortable doing so.

**NOTES FOR EACH SUNDAY FROM PENTECOST TO THE END OF AUGUST
ARE AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD FREE FROM LATE APRIL 2019 AT**

www.ben-whitney.org.uk