

6 April 2008

'Convincing Proof'

Acts 1:3

I wonder who are the people whom you most trust to tell you the truth? Every year since 1983, the Royal College of Physicians has commissioned MORI, the opinion poll company, to find out the answer to that very question. The results of this year's survey were published early last month; they make interesting reading.

It is doctors who in fact top the poll, as they have every year: no less than 90% of people trust doctors to be truthful. (You have to ask how they have earned this reputation). Next come teachers, trusted by 86% of the people surveyed, followed by professors and judges, both on 78%. In fifth place - and I find this a bit worrying - came the clergy, trusted to tell the truth by 73% of people, followed by scientists and news readers. And propping up the table came politicians and journalists, who both scored a mere 18% on trustworthiness; more than three-quarters of those surveyed said they did not expect politicians in general to tell the truth, compared with just one on twenty who expected doctors to lie.

Now that survey was carried out for a specific reason and may not reflect the whole story of who we trust. For instance, people were not asked about plumbers ("We'll be with you first thing on Monday morning without fail"), or used-car salesmen ("Just 10,000 miles on the clock or my name's not Honest John"), or builders ("Don't know what cowboy put this lot up but patching won't do the job; you're going to need a whole new roof"), or British Airways chairmen ("We'll have all the bugs ironed out and the new baggage system running smoothly by next week"). Nevertheless, we all have our own ideas of who we trust and who is more likely to be economical with the truth - and, of course, sometimes our assumptions are utterly wrong and we sadly end up being deceived.

Obviously, the bigger the promise or statement we are being asked to believe, the more important it is to know whom to trust. For instance, if we are in the supermarket and ask another shopper, "Which soup is better, Baxter's or Sainsbury's own brand?", it may not be too important if they don't tell us the truth. On the other hand, if we are investing £50,000 in a bank or spending £250,000 on a new house, we will want to be very sure that our Financial Adviser or Surveyor is up to the job and has no vested interests which may lead us to make poor decisions.

When we come to the Christian faith - and, in particular, the amazing events of Easter - we have to ask ourselves, "How reliable are the stories of the resurrection? How trustworthy are the witnesses? How credible is the proof we have?" And I think that it is right for us to ask those questions, for the Easter story presents itself as historical fact, not mere mythology. Of course, I am aware that there are difficulties in stitching together the four different Gospel accounts and I realise that there may be several different interpretations of the whole story; nevertheless, I do believe that it must stand or fall on whether it is literally true or not.

Now there are some people who say that the Easter story is true because the disciples had a spiritual experience which they believed was a meeting with the risen Jesus. Those of you who read "Reform" magazine will have seen John Shelby Spong's article last month taking precisely that line - and being shot down in flames by several letters to the Editor this month! I must side with those correspondents: an approach like Spong's is simply not good enough, it is completely subjective and totally unreliable. As far as I am concerned, if Easter is to be deemed true, then the facts of the case must be substantial enough to stand up in court, to be proved "beyond reasonable doubt". An alleged encounter with God, however vivid and life-changing, is not sufficient.

In this passage from St. Paul's letter to the church at Corinth he argues that a belief in Christ's resurrection is perfectly tenable. I'll return to that passage in a minute. But when we think of Paul, we know that he had gained his faith through exactly that kind of dramatic spiritual experience on the

Damascus Road, when he truly believed he had met Christ. Nevertheless, in this passage he is clear to tell his readers that his belief in the resurrection is primarily based on eye-witness accounts (and he clearly regrets that he had not been around on Easter morning to witness Christ rising from the dead).

So Paul gives us a list of testimonies to the resurrection. Intriguingly, they are not quite the same as the list we have in the four Gospels and Acts: in particular, he mentions one instance when Jesus appeared to over 500 people at once. We know nothing about that occurrence from any other Bible passage. What is also interesting is that Paul is making a conscious bridge between the first disciples who had been with Jesus and seen him alive again, and the rest of the Church which would have to take the story by faith - in just the same way as Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who believe without having seen me".

What Paul is really saying to the Corinthians is this, "These are the people who saw Jesus. I know them. They are trustworthy. Some of them" - and remember that he is writing up to 30 years after the first Easter - "Some of them are still alive today. You don't have to take my word; you can go and ask them yourselves". The factual truth of the resurrection is absolutely vital to Paul. He knows that a faith based on nothing more than spiritual experience, mythology or hearsay, has very flimsy foundations. Indeed, we end up turning God into a liar whose word is not worth trusting.

Of course, I would want to nuance the resurrection story just a little. It is incontrovertibly true that, although Christ was truly raised from death, there was something rather different about his body after Easter from before it. He seems to look rather different, so much so that the disciples found him hard to recognise - yet similar enough so that they are soon convinced that they had met the Lord. Christ seems to appear and disappear at will: he becomes very hard to pin down in one place, you can never be surer of locating him. He even seems, by a process of spiritual osmosis, to pass through closed doors and thick walls at will. Clearly we are not dealing with the purely human body of Jesus of Nazareth. Some we don't quite understand certainly has changed.

St. Paul himself recognises this - and explains it by saying that Christ, after Easter, is showing us the prototype of the new resurrection body that all believers will eventually acquire in glory. Now, you may think that that is a load of bunkum (and it certainly cannot be proved). Indeed, you might suggest that Paul is trying to massage some of the more inconvenient aspects of the Easter story to make it more acceptable. Of course you are entitled to your view; but I honestly don't think that is what Paul is doing. Writing long enough after Easter for the whole Church to have reflected on the story, he is coming to a considered opinion of the case. He knows, just as we do, that Christ's resurrection is very hard to accept. And he is trying to work out precisely what happened without descending to the dismissive rationalisation which simply says, "People don't come back from the dead, so Christ's couldn't have risen - end of story".

And so Paul argues to the Corinthians, "Listen! You say that there is no resurrection. Well, if that is true, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is null and void; in fact, you are putting your trust in an insubstantial fabrication, there is no future hope for you and all you deserve is pity for being so stupid to believe in him". In this argument Paul is probably not starting from the same place that we would start. But his conclusion is identical: without a genuine resurrection on Easter Day our Christian faith is pointless.

I don't intend to go into the proofs for Christ's resurrection this morning. I've already touched on them when I talked to the children, it would take far too long, and ultimately we each have to decide whether we believe the story is credible or not. Certainly Paul was convinced; so was Luke, who tells us so right at the beginning of the book of Acts; so was the early Church, which I am quite sure would not have continued for five minutes if Jesus hadn't really come back from the dead.

But I'd like to finish with the testimony of one man, a lawyer who, back in 1930, set out to write a book incontrovertibly disproving the resurrection, but ended up being soundly converted to Christ. In the preface to his book, "Who Moved the Stone?", Frank Morison wrote of how his belief changed. He said, "It is not that the facts themselves altered, for they are recorded imperishably in the monuments and in

the pages of human history. But the interpretation to be put upon the facts underwent a change. Somehow the perspective shifted - not suddenly, as in a flash of insight or inspiration, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, by the very stubbornness of the facts themselves”.

Yes, the accounts of the resurrection are hard to believe. Indeed, I would say they tell a story that is utterly unique. But I would contend that they ultimately allow only for one interpretation, which is that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead. By saying that I am not taking leave of my senses nor sticking my head in some religious sand. I am saying that the story of Easter morning is the single fact on which millions of people have based their entire lives, the foundation of the whole Christian faith. Yes, it is as important as that.