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# What does the resurrection really mean?

John 20.19-31

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 23 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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Christians believe God is all love and all power. That's why the heart of God breaks when Jesus hangs on the cross: because the overwhelming love of God that adores humankind is in unbearable tension with the overwhelming power of God that longs to obliterate evil. God's heart is all love and all power, and we see them both on Good Friday. On Good Friday God's heart breaks when his love and his power are going in opposite directions.

There are two main reasons why people stop believing in God. They either stop believing that God is all love. Or they stop believing that God is all power. We could call the first reason the moral reason. Its most famous exponent is Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan tells the story of a vindictive farmer, who punishes a wayward child by tying him to a cart and having a horse drag the cart all round the farm, leading to the child's grisly death. Ivan angrily shouts that if there is a God who has a heaven ready for us, then if that God allows suffering like the suffering of that child, that heaven isn't worth going to. In Ivan's words, 'I respectfully return my ticket'. The moral rejection of God doesn't question the existence or power of God; it just questions the goodness of God.

The second reason for stopping believing in God we could call the philosophical reason. It's most explicit exponent is Woody Allen. You'll remember his famous words, 'If it turns out that there is a God, then basically he's an underachiever.' This is a rejection of the belief that God is all power. Now this can come in a variety of forms. Some people carry on believing in an all-powerful force, but stop believing that that force is also all-loving. For example Marxists believe in this way in class conflict and the emergence of the proletariat, and extreme Darwinists believe in this way in natural selection and the capacity of species to imitate and adapt. Other people continue to hold some kind of a belief in the divine quality of love, but cease to believe that that divine love is all-powerful. For example one congregation was appalled when a nightclub opened up next door to the church building. Questions about the well being of the nightclub began to make veiled appearances in the regular intercessions: hostility was being dressed up as piety. One night the nightclub burned down. The nightclub owner wanted to prosecute the church, for he was aware that many members had prayed for just such a turn of events. But the congregation denied any involvement, and seemed as surprised as everyone else. Like a lot of churches, that congregation assumed God was all-loving but had long ago stopped believing that God was all-powerful.

Today's gospel reading concludes with one of the most baffling statements in all of scripture. 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.' I beg your pardon. You mean to say Mr John, or shall I call be formal and call you the Fourth Evangelist, you mean to say that you know a whole lot more about Jesus that you're not telling us? You cannot be serious! How tantalizing is that? You've convinced us that Jesus is the central character in world history, and then you say 'That's all folks! Storytime over. Time for bed.'

It's not surprising we drool over reports of new gospels found, new archaeological discoveries made, new insights into the life and character of Jesus. When we have come to love someone, let alone depend on them for our eternal destiny, we want to know every last detail about them. We don't want to be informed 'That's all I'm going to say'.

Yet John goes on to tell us, 'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'. I want to look closely at this sentence. 'So that you may come to believe that Jesus is the *Messiah*, the *Son of God*'. I want to suggest to you that John's concern in summing up his gospel is precisely to address the two questions I have just been exploring. Is God all love? And is God all power?

Let's start with the first question, the moral question. Is God good? The way John answers this question is to assert that Jesus is the Messiah. Why is it so important to John that we believe that Jesus is the Messiah? Well, principally because John wants us to know that we can trust God. John tells us that Jesus is the Messiah in order to assure us that God is good. God keeps his promises.

This means first of all that God keeps his promises to Israel. The Old Testament is a litany of God's promises to his chosen people. John's gospel is the story of how all these promises find their yes in Christ. Jesus is the new Moses, who gives his people bread in the wilderness. Jesus is the new Elijah, who raises a beloved man from death. Jesus is the new Isaiah, who speaks for God's people in exile and becomes the suffering servant who takes away the people's sins. Jesus is the new Jeremiah, who meets God's people in a time of desperation and scarcity and gives them joy and abundance, bringing home all the outcasts and the excluded to his wondrous kingdom. Jesus is the new Ezekiel, offering in his own body the new Temple that reconciles God and his people. And God does to Jesus one thing he never once did to any of the prophets: he raises Jesus to new life. Jesus is the Messiah.

John doesn't just show us how the resurrected Jesus fulfils the promises God made in the Old Testament. He also shows us how Jesus keeps the promises he himself made earlier in the gospel. There are at least four such fulfillments in today's reading. The first time John the Baptist speaks about Jesus in John chapter 1, he says 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me'. Here, when Jesus appears to the disciples in John chapter 20, we have the very same words: 'Jesus came and stood among them'. The first thing that happens to Jesus in John chapter 1 is that he receives the Holy Spirit in being baptized by John. The first thing that happens to the disciples when Jesus appears to them in John chapter 20 is that they receive the Holy Spirit as Jesus breathes upon them. And there are also two promises Jesus fulfils from his last words to the disciples before his betrayal and death. In John chapter 14 Jesus says, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives'. Here in John chapter 20 sure enough Jesus' first words are 'Peace be with you.' And then in John chapter 16 Jesus promises 'I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.' And sure enough, here in John chapter 20, the first thing John tells us after Jesus has finished speaking is 'Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.'

These are all ways in which John is telling us, Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the one promised by God, and God keeps his promises, and Jesus fulfilled God's promises and made promises of his own, and in the resurrection he kept those promises too. God is good. You can trust him.

So let's turn to the second question, the philosophical question. Is God powerful? The way John answers this question is to say Jesus is the Son of God. Why does this title matter so much? Why, when it comes to summarizing his gospel in a single sentence, does John choose the title Son of God alongside Messiah to identify Jesus? Well, because there was one man in the ancient world who habitually assigned to himself this title, a man who ruled the known world and had the power of life and death over pretty much every living thing that moved or breathed on the face of the earth. And that man was the Roman Emperor. The Roman Emperor called himself the Son of God. So when we read in Mark and Matthew's gospels that when Jesus breathed his last on the cross and the centurion said 'Truly this man was the Son of God', we're not talking about a centurion who carefully did the sums in his head – 'darkness, drama, agonizing suffering, true goodness ... it all adds up to something special – only one way to describe him – the Son of God'. No, it's far more significant than that. The centurion, the man who put Jesus to death, stands at the foot of the cross, sees a dying man and proclaims 'This dying man is my true Emperor, and I shall be loyal to him even if it costs me my loyalty to the so-called Emperor in Rome. *This* man, not the Emperor, is the real Son of God.' It's a sensational statement for a Roman commander to make. And we get a similar statement from Thomas in today's gospel. After Jesus has fulfilled all the promises of God in appearing to the disciples on the first day of the week, proving himself to be the Messiah, he comes back a week later and appears again, this time with Thomas present, and what does Thomas say? What does Thomas say? 'My Lord and my God' – in Latin 'Dominus deusque' – another title given to the Roman Emperor. So the disciples on Easter Day greet Jesus as the Messiah and Thomas a week later greets Jesus as the Son of God. The disciples recognize that Jesus is the God of the Jews and Thomas recognizes that Jesus is the God of the whole world too. For what Thomas sees is something the Roman Emperor could

never aspire to, something beyond the imagination of even the most powerful force on earth: what Thomas sees is power over death. Jesus stands before him, having died on the cross just ten days earlier. This is power, awesome, astonishing, glorious power, and power in the hands of one who continues to be gracious, loving and forgiving even after his disciples' betrayal, denial, and desertion.

So we begin to see why John feels there is little left to say. He has shown us that the God of Israel is faithful, keeps his promises, and fulfils his scripture. God is good. And he has shown us that the God of the whole world puts Roman might to shame, and overcomes even the horror of death. God is powerful. John demonstrates how God meets our doubts and skepticism at every turn. God is good and God is powerful. John's story has given us the whole gospel in his account of Jesus' resurrection. There is only one thing more to hope for – the one part of John's sentence we haven't yet talked about. 'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing *you may have life in his name*'.

There is actually a third reason why people don't believe in God. It's not a moral or philosophical one. It's simply that they don't get round to it. God is all-loving and all-powerful – but they've got other things on their minds. A while ago I saw a story in a London newspaper. The story began by saying that there was a wealthy landowner in Ireland. The old landowner died leaving a huge fortune. When his attorneys found his last will and testament they discovered he had only one heir. That heir was nowhere to be found. They issued invitations on the radio and in newspapers, but there was no response. Twenty years later, after a man died in a night shelter in London, he was discovered to have been the missing heir. He never knew about the enormous fortune, let alone claimed it, because he had never got round to being in touch with his Irish cousins.

How many of us are like that man? Wandering alone in misery and despair, because there is news of breathtaking joy, but we have never got round to believing it. The pathos in the story of the man in the night shelter we should feel for ourselves. But the difference is, we can do something about it. John's gospel is a great gift to us. It shows us on the one hand that God is all-loving, that he forgives even after the cross, that he is faithful, that we can trust him. It shows us on the other hand that God is all-powerful, that there is no human power that can compare to him and that he can overcome even the power of death. God is all love and God is all power. The gift of John's gospel is that through meeting Jesus in it we may find resurrection life, a life suffused with forgiveness and love, a life free from the fear of oppression and death. But to find that life we must believe the gospel of Jesus. We must claim the inheritance, embody the love, receive the power. And through believing, we will have life in his name.