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## Sermon

### ***Three Responses to the Risen Christ***

**Acts 9:1-20; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19**

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On Easter Sunday, we celebrated Jesus rising from the dead to new resurrection life. As we move through this Easter season, the readings trace for us on the one hand the revealed glory of Jesus and on the other his resurrection appearances and the growth of the Church.

Who is this Jesus? It is the important question to settle. Teacher? Good man? Lunatic, liar or Lord! Those with little appreciation of his words may like to say he was a good teacher. And while it is true that he taught high moral principles, he also claimed to be God. If he claimed that and was not, then he was not a good teacher. C.S. Lewis laid out this argument in “Mere Christianity” writing,

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

### **The Glorified Son of God**

The reading from the Revelation to John is an account of the vision John saw of heavenly worship of the Son of God. There the Lamb of God, a title of Jesus, the one who was sacrificed for humanity is alive. Hundreds of millions of angels gather to worship him singing his praises; the highest angelic authorities bow down before him. This is the one who saved us, the one we follow, the one we too worship. Here we are given a glimpse of glories beyond our conception which are duly offered to the Son of God.

Last week, we were given the eye witness account by his disciples of his meeting them in the Upper Room on the evening of the resurrection. Then, you will remember, he entered the room although the doors were locked, he spoke with them, showed them the crucifixion wounds, ate with them and imparted the Holy Spirit

to them. Again the following Sunday, he came among them to convince Thomas who had been absent on the previous occasion. Thomas made an about turn from explosively denying it was possible for Jesus to be alive, to worshipping him as his Lord and God – an extraordinary statement for a Jewish man to make.

He had effectively said of his fellow disciples that they were lying about meeting Jesus – then he was convinced. I wonder if you are in a similar place – it is impossible to believe that Jesus is God and rose from the dead. What would it take for you to believe?

## Simon Peter

Let's think about Simon Peter. Before Jesus was arrested he had believed and had been so sure of his commitment:

"Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." <sup>38</sup> Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times!"<sup>1</sup>

And of course that is what he did, as he waited while Jesus was under arrest – three times he denied him, “No, not a disciple”; “No I wasn’t with him.”; “I am **not** his disciple!” Peter was afraid – afraid to suffer, afraid to die – and with good reason. Afterwards, he was ashamed and heartbroken at his denial. But Jesus set up this situation to restore him. We heard about it in the gospel reading. After the evening when Thomas met with Jesus, the disciples went north back to Galilee and some of them started to return to their old occupation of fishing. When Simon was first called, he had been fishing all night and caught nothing. He and his partners were cleaning their nets when Jesus came along and spoke to the crowd. He asked to use Simon’s boat to speak to the crowd. After-wards, he told Simon to push out and throw down the net for a catch. Now you don’t fish in those waters at daytime, the men had fished all night and caught nothing. However, Simon obeyed and caught a huge catch which tears the nets and needed two boats to manage it.

Well, here they are again with Simon Peter having fished all night and caught nothing and again being told to cast the net in daylight and again there was a huge catch. Surely, Peter would remember the previous time which resulted in his following Jesus. Jesus renewed his call to Simon Peter to follow him.

Then he dealt with the denials. That fateful night, Peter had been warming himself by a charcoal fire. Now again by a charcoal fire, three times Jesus asked, “Do you love me?” And three times Peter said he did. However, Peter has a new humility. Where he had boasted of his loyalty, now he dare not claim much for himself – but says, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

In these three repetitions, Jesus restored him in relationship, responsibility and to his role.

I asked whether Thomas’ experience had relevance to you; maybe Peter’s is closer to the mark. You believed but somehow fear got in and you have turned back and denied him. Jesus’ treatment of Peter says there is a way back. Jesus sought out Peter, he reminded him of his calling, he led him through a restatement of his faith, he healed the wounds of shame and denial and restored him in relationship. Why wouldn’t he do as much for you?

## Saul of Tarsus

There is a third character before us today – Saul of Tarsus. While Thomas struggled to believe in his grief and despair, while Peter failed in his fear, Saul was indignant at what he saw as the blasphemy of the claims of Jesus and his followers. He understood that Jesus claimed to be God and for that he and his followers should

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:37-38

die – and he would do all he could to stamp out this movement quickly. As he travelled to Damascus (North of Israel) to root out some believers there, he has his dramatic conversion experience on the way.

His description is of a blazing light like the sun, falling from his horse blind and hearing a voice speak to him. He knew Jesus was addressing him, and saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Elsewhere, Paul said that Jesus had said, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”<sup>2</sup> A goad is a sharp stick used to prod cattle. When they kick back against it they are hurt more by their own action.

Saul had witnessed the stoning of Stephen, it is possible he may have encountered Jesus in Jerusalem. Now Stott writes,

There could be no misunderstanding what had happened. The risen Lord had appeared to Saul. It was not a subjective vision or dream; it was an objective appearance of the resurrected and now-glorified Christ. The light he saw was the glory of Christ, and the voice he heard was the voice of Christ. Christ had interrupted his headlong career of persecution and had turned him around to face in the opposite direction.<sup>3</sup>

Paul later says that God’s grace arrested him, shone in his heart and swept over him like a flood. The results were startling as the story unfolded. In a matter of days the persecutor of Christianity was preaching Christ in the synagogue!

Some people have a life-long relationship with Christ and cannot identify a change, some have a gradual development of relationship, some have a clear-cut moment when everything changes. Some today, have dramatic encounters and visions of Jesus; others don’t. If we are given such experiences presumably it is because we need them. If we are not, maybe we are able to believe without them.

Are you more in the Saul category? I guess nowadays in NZ, such a person is more likely to be an atheist than strictly like Saul. Maybe you are just angry at the nonsense of this faith business or angry with God for something that happened or didn’t happen. It is hard for you to kick against the pricks. Saul met Jesus and was changed. Other angry men and women in modern times have met Jesus and been changed – not necessarily as dramatic a meeting as Saul’s but just as convincing and transforming.

Three characters, three responses, three people who came into radical relationship and obedience to Christ.

The claim of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Son of God, that he lived a pure and sinless life on earth as a real man. He died for our sins and rose again from the dead. The promise of the New Testament is that as we put our trust in him to save us he does just that and brings us into relationship with the Father.

Where are you? In profound doubt? Afraid and running away? in despair because of your own failures? deeply angry with God? Or maybe somewhere else entirely: tortured by your conscience over something of the past? numb inside from the grief you carry? There are so many states we could be experiencing.

Maybe as I have painted with broad brush strokes these three characters and the nature of the one they came to acknowledge as Lord, God and Saviour you realise you would like to respond to him. Maybe you have already but wish to re-establish connection that after failure, the pain or the dashing of hopes.

Let’s take an opportunity to come to Jesus and say, do it for me too, Lord. I want to come to you or to come back to you. You’re right about kicking against the pricks – I want to give in.

If you want to respond to Jesus, you could pray this prayer:

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 26:14

<sup>3</sup> Stott, J., 1991, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Leicester, p170

Jesus, you are risen and glorified. I believe you are the Son of God, I believe you died and rose again from the dead.

I have sinned. I have turned away from you and gone my own way. I have disobeyed and done things against your will. I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. Please forgive me.

Thank you that you died on the cross for me, so that I could be forgiven and set free. Thank you that you offer me forgiveness and the gift of your Spirit.

I choose to believe and ask for your gift of faith. I choose to follow you and ask that you would change my heart. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and lead me into freedom from my fears and to the inner peace of your ways.

Thank you Lord Jesus, Amen.

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