

EASTER JIGSAW

One of the things Wendy and I have turned to in this year of lockdowns has been jigsaws. We've not done jigsaws for years and we've had a lot of enjoyment. We worked out a system – I did the simple bits and Wendy did the hard bits. It worked well. It's great seeing the picture take shape before your eyes, all the various pieces beginning to make sense and come into focus.

That's how I feel when I look at the resurrection. We start with lots of pieces of information which individually don't look definitive, but put them together and you have an emerging picture of a stunning event, one that has ricocheted around the world ever since and has brought a third of the world's population to faith. Because of course, if there's no resurrection, there's no Christianity; just a dead prophet hanging on a cross.

But those who see the jigsaw as a completed picture find there an endless source of hope, energy, and inspiration. The old world, frozen in negativity and confusion, 'defrosts' around us and comes alive in glorious colour. And we know that this is what we're made for – life in full colour, life in abundance.

So let's look at those pieces of the jigsaw that together convince Christians that Christ is truly let loose in the world, even today in a world battered by Covid. Here's the first piece. **There was an empty tomb.** It's in the earliest tradition, and no-one at the time seems to have disputed the fact. So the question is: why was the tomb empty? Could the Jewish authorities or Pilate have taken the body of Jesus away for safe keeping, to stop a dangerous cult developing? If so, then why didn't they produce the body when those silly stories of resurrection started circulating? OK, so maybe the disciples took the body away? But then why would they die for what they knew to be a lie? Every one of them – except John – died for their faith.

Here's piece number two. **Jesus kept on appearing to his followers** for weeks afterwards. Hallucination? Hardly – not over such a long period, in such down-to-earth ways, and to so many people (Paul in 1 Corinthians even records Christ being seen by '500 at one time'). I once ate a daffodil in church on Easter morning to make the point that if someone in the congregation went home and said that the vicar ate a daffodil in church, he might not have been believed, but if 250 people from church all went home and said the same thing you'd have to start taking it seriously. Sadly I have to tell you I ate too much of the daffodil and was sick. I tried it again on another occasion. I was sick again.

Here's jigsaw piece number three: **the disciples were utterly changed, top to toe, inside out.** Here were frightened, demoralised men and women, who'd seen their hopes catastrophically destroyed on the cross, now fearlessly out on the streets telling everyone that Jesus had been raised to life and they'd met him. It was crazy, inviting death for themselves. Unless they just couldn't contain themselves. Unless it was true.

Lord Blair, Ian Blair, formerly Commissioner of the Met, said that as a detective this was for him the definitive evidence for the resurrection. Nothing else could account for such a reckless change of heart.

Piece number four: **the existence of the worldwide Church** and the 2.4 billion Christians today. You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool so many, so much, and for so long. You can't base such a huge, worldwide religion on a fundamental untruth. Such a deceit is bound to collapse under its own falsity.

Want another piece of the jigsaw – number five? How about **the phenomenal claims** made about Jesus by the people who had once known him personally. They'd lived with him night and day, they'd done the washing up with him, gone swimming with him, laughed and sung with him at those long evening meals - and now they were saying he was divine. The first Christians fell over themselves trying to find titles and phrases that were exalted enough – look at Philippians or Colossians or indeed any of the letters in the New Testament. Something immense had happened to make them say all this.

OK – that's five pieces of the jigsaw. But there's another crucial piece without which all these others might still seem unconvincing, and that's the **personal experience** of ordinary Christians, of people like you and me. Is there some way we ourselves can say that we have *known* the risen Christ? Because otherwise this could all be an interesting intellectual exercise but the jigsaw won't really come together – won't show the picture of a risen Christ; it'll just show *ideas* about a risen Christ. An interesting theory.

As a newly committed Christian I once argued the case for the resurrection with my atheist grandmother. At the end she said, 'All right, you might have won the argument, but you'll never convince me.' I felt as if I'd crushed a butterfly. Argument, without personal experience, isn't enough.

In a matter like the resurrection of course we're venturing into what's ultimately a mystery, a different dimension of truth. Truth is always bigger than the facts; it includes the facts, of course, but it's bigger. So ordinary categories of proof don't actually work with the resurrection. It's like asking if a late Beethoven quartet is true. What does that mean? It's like trying to describe what it's like falling in love. It's like trying to measure courage in pounds and ounces.

So we need a large piece of our jigsaw called 'personal experience' that's deeper than mere argument. In what way can I describe my **experience** of the risen Christ. *Je ne sais quoi!* But the nearest I can get is to say that *I know I am never alone. And that that 'neveraleness' is personal; it has the quality, the character, of Christ.* And that confidence reaches down below the level of mere argument. It's an existential reality in me, that Christ is risen, that he's alive, now, through his Spirit.

Archbishop Janani Luwum was killed by Idi Amin in Uganda, probably personally by Amin himself when the archbishop went to remonstrate with him over the extra-judicial murders going on all over the country at the time. Thousands of people gathered on the hill called Namirembe, devastated at the news of their archbishop's assassination. People just stood there on the hill, dazed, stunned by what had happened. Then the retired archbishop of Uganda came out and began to read Luke's account of the resurrection, pausing at the verse where the angel says to the women, 'Why do you look for the *living* among the dead?' They

realised what he was saying. Spontaneously a song of praise started rolling across the hillside: 'Glory, glory, alleluia.' They recognised that Christ was raised from the dead, and so therefore was their archbishop. The people **knew** it, at a level deeper than mere proof; the resurrection held them at the core of their lives.

That's where I find my final piece of the jigsaw. I don't claim to understand all the conundrums of the resurrection, the process, the nature of a spiritual body and so on. But that's OK. In the resurrection we're on the very edge of human understanding. Indeed, Tolkein, the Oxford academic who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, said that the resurrection is 'a joy beyond the walls of the world.' It's beyond us, by definition. The theologian David Ford wrote, 'There's no ready-made world-view into which resurrection fits. If we think we have a framework that contains it, then we haven't grasped the sort of event it is.'

But that's fine, we're creatures, not the Creator. We're Harry Potter, not JK Rowling. We've been created, *written into* life, and we'll never be able to understand the genius of the author himself. But we know enough. *We know we're not alone, and that that 'neveraloneness' is personal; it has the character of Christ.*

In 1920, three years after the Russian Revolution, a large atheist rally was held in Kiev and a powerful orator was sent from Moscow. For an hour he demolished the Christian faith with argument, and abuse and ridicule. At the end there was silence; then questions were invited. A man got up. He was a Russian Orthodox priest and he went and stood next to the orator, facing the people. 'Christ is risen!' he said, simply. Immediately the whole audience was on its feet. 'He is risen indeed!' they replied joyfully.

Exit one atheist, faced with the deep, existential conviction of the people of God. Personal experience is the final piece of the Easter jigsaw.

The resurrection? Of course it couldn't happen. That's the point. It's so outrageous it could change your life.