

Easter Address 2020

Let me begin with a question. What does the duck billed platypus and Easter have in common? Not much might be your initial response, but can I suggest that there is one common ground: that they both assert extraordinary claims that are unlikely, illogical, and extraordinary.

The first Australian settlers were amazed to discover the duck billed platypus: it lays eggs like a bird, is furry like a mole, swims like an otter, suckles its young like a mammal, has a venomous sack like a reptile, a tail like a beaver and a bill like a duck's. It is an extraordinary hybrid, and there was enormous scepticism in London's learned circles when reports first reached them. 'No such creature can exist- it's impossible', they said.

When skeleton's started to arrive they concluded, 'Clever taxidermists out there- no such creature can exist. It's impossible'.

The naturalist George Shaw at the British Museum, wrote, "It is impossible not to... surmise that there might have been practised some arts of deception in its structure." It was unlikely, illogical, and extraordinary.

But when London's sharpest minds eventually encountered a living egg laying, furry like a mole, swimming like an otter, suckling like a mammal, venomous like a reptile, tail like a beaver: duck billed platypus- they changed their minds. In the light of the living encounter they expanded the classification of the animal kingdom to accommodate a new reality based not on what was thought possible but what they had experienced. Unlikely, illogical, and extraordinary, however, the duck billed platypus lived.

When the first Christians spoke of resurrection they too met with claims of incredulity. The Roman historian Tacitus called it a 'deadly superstition'. Saul of Tarsus sought to destroy the illogical conviction that Jesus was alive. Yet those closest to the events were unswerving. Their encounters, their experiences convinced them to assert an extraordinary claim that defies reason. That he was alive. Against all the odds they persisted in the claim of resurrection.

Within the first writings of the church they could not avoid speaking about resurrection. Their preaching centred upon this awkward assertion: cross and suffering, empty tomb and hope. 'God has raised Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses' says Peter in the book of Acts, and over the ensuing decades they hold to that assertion.

Easter and the duck billed platypus have this in common: unlikely, illogical, and extraordinary, but, 'He is alive'.

For millions of people around the world today these Gospel accounts continue to have a curious ring of truth. Not because they always harmonise, but because they honestly struggle to find the language to express that:

After the cross and tomb there was a rolled stone and folded grave clothes.

After death there is life
After darkness there is light
After hatred there is love.

For some this resurrection is echoed in buried seeds, butterflies emerging from chrysalises and when frozen relationships are transformed.

It seems to me that resurrection gives birth to Hope. For each one of us living through these deeply disturbing times it invites security- come what may. St Paul, the one-time sceptic, would write to the Philippians, 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain'.

To live in Christ, is to 'know that our times are in his hands', to receive an abiding peace and strength. This Easter message is deeply personal and profoundly transformative. It is knowing the Good Shepherd in our green pastures and dark valleys.

And if there is anyone listening who is going through a really tough time, can I pass on what I learnt last year from a lady who had tragically lost her daughter.

She said, "I coped, because I discovered that in the valley of the shadow of death, that for there to be a shadow there must also be light". She said, "Even in the most difficult of times, I sensed light in the darkness and I focussed on that. It got me through. If there are shadows- there has to be light".

The message of Easter has therefore the power to help us transform. One question that has struck a cord with me in recent times, somebody called Dave Hollis- no idea who he is, asked, "When the time comes, In the rush to return to normal, which parts of normal are worth rushing back to".

I wonder what a new normal might mean for the way that we do church. Do we need so many buildings, so many duplications? Is this a moment for us to grasp a new vision of being a servant church that seeks less focus about the number attending and the building and more about being authentic, honest and vulnerable and doing our bit to help the needs of others.

I wonder what a new normal might mean for the care of our environment- this fragile, blue marble in a vast ocean of space darkness. How might we lay down those things that harm our eco-system and live for those things that steward, tend, care and cultivate.

I wonder what a new normal might mean for the poorest of the world who live on a pittance. Is it possible that this unwanted global hiatus might give us space to think through our ethics of wealth creation and retention and how all can live well?

To these, idealistic, impossible, illogical unreasonable questions- there can be an emphatic, 'No'. As crisp and clear as those who denied the possibility of the duck billed platypus, or Tacitus who described resurrection as a 'deadly superstition'.

But, let's stop and dig around in the language of Easter, isn't there the potential for us to imagine 'Thy kingdom on earth as it is in heaven'?

Look out, this language of resurrection is dangerous stuff- it challenges convention, offers radical transformation beyond the known experience of reason.

So I invite you today with countless millions to say, "Alleluia, Christ is Alive!" And then live it in the choices that you make, so that all of God's glorious creation, all of his people on earth, can live at ease and sing, 'Bless the Lord My Soul, Bless God's Holy Name'.

Easter and the story of the duck billed platypus have this in common; unlikely, illogical, and extraordinary: but, 'He is alive'.

Tony Morling