

JESUS' RESURRECTION: LIVING REALITY OR INSPIRING SYMBOL?

By Don Evans

Concerning the resurrection of Jesus there are two extreme views within the Christian Church today. Some see it as a living reality within a belief-framework where there is no salvation except through Jesus. Others see it as an inspiring symbol within a belief-framework where nobody can return from the dead. Most United Church people hold views somewhere in between the extremes, but closer to one than the other. As can be seen in letters to the Observer, there is little dialogue concerning the resurrection and related scriptural issues. People just talk past each other. More dialogue could occur if each side could come to realize that they need to question a conviction that seems obvious to them. Each side holds a key conviction in a dogmatic way, not able or willing to revise it.

Such an admission is especially difficult for Christians whose world-view involves what can be called a “humanistic spirituality”. They see themselves as dogma-free, yet something like the following seems unquestionably obvious to them (though not to me): “When people die they do not continue to exist spiritually in an after-life from which they can return to help us. That is utterly impossible. All that really happens is that people live on in the memories of those who loved them, who continue to tell inspiring stories in remembrance of them. Sometimes, as in the case of Jesus, communities pass these stories along for centuries. A story such as the one about his resurrection is not to be understood literally but symbolically.”

On this humanistic approach imaginative symbols are not simply idle fantasies. They can convey a kind of truth beyond what biological science can investigate, truth concerning the human spirit, with its courage, creativity and compassion, its trust, hope and love. Truth concerning these and other human capacities is expressed in symbolic language, which also inspires the capacities in us. That is the function of scripture, to nurture the human spirit. Scripture presents imaginative literature, not literal history or scientific facts.

From my own perspective, humanistic spirituality rightly rejects the culturally dominant “scientism” which confines truth to scientific truth, thereby allowing no significant place for language that expresses the reality and dignity of the human spirit. I also agree with a humanistic emphasis on cultivating the best in the human spirit, so that humankind can learn to live in peace and harmony. And clearly there is much in scripture that is best understood symbolically rather than literally.

The world-view of humanistic spirituality, however, involves a scientific stance concerning life after death. It rules out any possibility that we can receive help from deceased persons who remain alive and who can contact us. It rejects all testimony concerning such “merely subjective” experiences of spiritual presence. Yet many human beings in many cultures report experiences of receiving help from wise or saintly persons who have already passed on. More specifically, millions of Christians have testified to the distinctive resurrected presence of Jesus, who comes into our hearts to transform us if we welcome him. The scientific stance involves being closed to this possibility not only intellectually but also personally, ignoring or explaining-away any hints of Jesus’ presence that occur within one’s own experience. By clinging to one’s world-view one not only refuses to consider the testimony of others but also refuses to be experientially open to Jesus oneself. Humanistic spirituality can thus resist the crucial personal experiences that would challenge its dogmatism. Only inspiring stories about Jesus remain.

At the other extreme there are Christians who would describe themselves as “evangelicals”. What seems obvious to many of them is the belief-framework that they bring to their experience of Jesus: “We are all sinners deserving divine punishment in hell, but Jesus took on that punishment for us. We are saved if, and only if, we accept him as our personal saviour. Nothing else really matters except accepting Jesus in this way, for nothing else brings salvation. Not only secular humanism, but also all other religious paths are evil in so far as they are rivals to the Gospel”.

This evangelical belief-framework is understandably impressive to its adherents, for it can be justified by much in Christian scripture and tradition. Moreover, since it is the only framework in which many

evangelicals experience the risen Jesus, it seems self-evident and it is reinforced by subsequent experiences.

From my own perspective, I am impressed when I meet some evangelicals who clearly have a distinctive love for people through their spiritual intimacy with Jesus. And I agree with evangelicals in their insistence that Jesus still exists, independently of our remembering his earthly life. For them as for me, Jesus is a real spiritual presence whom we can directly experience, resonating with his love in our hearts. And I respect the testimony of Christians who accept Jesus as their personal saviour out of a sinful “hell” of addiction, despair or crime.

However, the “no salvation outside of Jesus” belief-framework needs to be challenged, in three ways: First, a person who has experienced being saved by Jesus out of a personal hell on earth does not have to believe that everyone else is damned to hell after death unless they hold that Jesus “paid” God for our sins on the cross.. What theologians call the “saving work” of God in Jesus has been understood in many other ways, for example, God’s transformative identification with us in our vulnerability and suffering. . Second, the dogma fosters a self-deceptive “us-them” contrast, where “we” have been saved from sin and “they” have not, so that most of the significant evil in humankind is discerned in “them”. Third, some version of the “only through Jesus” dogma has been central in the often-brutal process of evangelizing those cultures that have been conquered by Christians. The destructive historical consequences of this conviction have become more and more evident to conscientious Christians. As they see a connection between the dogma of “only through Jesus” and cultural genocide, some become understandably resistant to any experience of the risen Jesus, whether claimed by others or as a possibility for themselves. Instead, they are drawn towards the generous inclusiveness of humanistic spirituality, with its sense of being alongside the rest of humankind: “We’re all in this together”.

I, too, see the dogma of “no salvation outside of Jesus” as destructive in its consequences. Nevertheless, I welcome the risen Jesus. Indeed, my own experience of him contradicts that dogma. For me he is an indwelling, loving presence who rejoices in any flourishing of the human spirit in any religious or non-religious context. So I celebrate with Jesus the love that flourishes among many Christian humanists,

secular humanists, people of other faiths (and in spite of their destructive dogma, evangelical Christians!) The fruits of the Spirit can be discerned everywhere. As a member of the committee that drafted the United Church Creed forty years ago I remember that we deliberately inserted the words “and others” (meaning other Christians, people of other faiths and secular humanists) in the phrase: “who works in us and others by the Spirit”.

Although I thus endorse a humanistic welcoming of diversity in human world-views, I do hope that more humanistically-inclined people within the United Church could become less resistant to experiencing the real spiritual presence of Jesus, receiving him personally into their hearts. This is not at all a matter of thereby avoiding hell, but rather of opening oneself into a more abundant life. In so far as evangelical Christians experience Jesus as an infinitely precious gift, I can understand their hope that others may come to know him personally. However, I do not share their conviction that nothing else should matter to anyone. In dialogue with others, I can testify from my own experience of Jesus, but I continue to remain open to learn from their experience, whether it arises within Buddhist meditation, aboriginal drumming or Hindu chanting. The Divine Mystery is beyond any of our varied rituals and formulations, none of which are appropriately held as ultimate. We need to hold our frameworks flexibly, especially where rigidity promotes conflict. This is possible for Christians, even if we hold that Jesus was and is, in a unique way beyond our understanding, fully Divine: “the Word made flesh”. God can also be deeply at work in people who do not believe this.

Creative dialogue between Christian evangelicals and Christian humanists is possible. Some Christian evangelicals may become more open in their assumptions concerning the real Jesus. I hope that they may learn through their own direct experiences of Jesus, that he is encouraging them to expand their previous understanding of scripture and tradition, as he encouraged his disciples to expand theirs. And some Christian humanists may become more open to the possibility that an experience of the risen Jesus can deeply enhance our human capacity for compassion. I hope that they may realize that the risen Jesus promotes, rather than impedes, respectful reconciliation between the diverse cultures on our planet.