

# 6 The Passion and Resurrection Narratives

We read in Paul's letter to the Romans:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

This letter was written c.55-57CE and is among the earliest Christian writings contained in the New Testament. Whereas the earliest gospel texts probably date from around thirty years after Jesus' death, Paul began his preaching shortly after his conversion which is thought to have occurred within a few years of Jesus' death.<sup>2</sup>

The first *kerygma* was the message that Jesus, who had been crucified, had risen from death: Paul himself had encountered the risen Jesus, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>3</sup> and he mentions - in his First Letter to the Corinthians - how the risen Jesus had appeared to many people, and finally to himself:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them— though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:5-11

<sup>2</sup> thought to be in either 30 or 33CE; Paul's conversion is generally dated to 31-36CE

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:1-22. This text dates probably from c.80-90CE and Paul does not describe his conversion in detail in his own letters, although he does refer to it in Galatians 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:8

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Paul affirms that, whoever the preacher, it is **one** message proclaimed to all: the message that the crucified Christ was now risen from death.

---

## The Central Message

It is not simply the fact that the *kerygma* of Christ risen is the earliest message in Christian preaching; it is the **significance** of that message which is central to Christian faith. That Jesus *rose from death* is the event - and the disciples' experience - that changed everything: as Paul wrote:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

This text is dated c.49-51CE and shows how, since his conversion, Paul's thinking has developed in the light of his own prayer and reflection. Just as we are called to do, Paul *grew in faith and understanding*: his theology is the fruit of his faith and - as for us all - reflects his own insights and limitations. The truth that his writings - as those of the evangelists and other New Testament authors - are accepted as holy Scripture does not erase the difficulties which these writings present to us. We are called to read or listen to them *in faith* and so to hear the Word of God spoken in the words of human beings.

**Exercise: Choose one of the above texts and read through it slowly and prayerfully** - let the words sink deep into your heart: this may take some time because we are so used to skimming the surface of things - indeed, often, the surface of our lives as a whole.

Can you recognise how the text reflects the Word of God and yet remains the words of Paul, a man?

Are you able to read the text, seeing first the one aspect and then the other?

There is an interplay of the human and the divine here: God never overrides the human, but speaks compassionately and deeply to the heart of human experience in words we ourselves use and recognise.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:12-22

## The Passion and Resurrection Narratives in the Gospels

Although the accounts of Jesus' life, miracles and teaching vary between the four canonical<sup>6</sup> gospels, the synoptic texts largely agree in their accounts of Jesus' condemnation, death and resurrection. This reflects not only their use of common sources, but the strength and centrality of the message: the story of Jesus's death and resurrection was the centre of the gospel message, the *kerygma*.

The synoptic gospels vary, however, according to details - this may reflect the intentions of the author or the fact that different authors were aware of slightly different written and oral traditions. We can see something of this by placing the texts alongside one another:<sup>7</sup>

### Mark

**15** As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. **2** Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' **3** Then the chief priests accused him of many things. **4** Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' **5** But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. **6** Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. **7** Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. **8** So the crowd came and began to

### Matthew

**27** When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. **2** They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. **3** When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. **4** He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' **5** Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. **6** But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' **7** After

### Luke

**23** Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. **2** They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' **3** Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' **4** Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' **5** But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.' **6** When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. **7** And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he

<sup>6</sup> 'Canonical' means the texts accepted by the Church as belonging to the New Testament: this was a process of discernment beginning in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and establishing its final form c.4<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>7</sup> If you would like to explore this further, see *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, by Kurt Aland, American Bible Society, 2010

ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. **9** Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' **10** For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. **11** But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. **12** Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' **13** They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' **14** Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' **15** So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. **16** Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters; and they called together the whole cohort. **17** And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. **18** And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' **19** They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. **20** After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. **8** For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. **9** Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, **10** and they gave<sup>□</sup> them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.' **11** Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' **12** But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. **13** Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' **14** But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. **15** Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. **16** At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. **17** So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah? **18** For he

sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. **8** When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. **9** He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. **10** The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. **11** Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. **12** That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. **13** Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, **14** and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. **15** Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. **16** I will therefore have him flogged and release him.' (**17** Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival) **18** Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' **19** (This was a man who

realised that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. **19** While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' **20** Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. **21** The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' **22** Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' **23** Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!' **24** So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' **25** Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' **26** So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. **27** Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the

had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) **20** Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; **21** but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' **22** A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' **23** But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. **24** So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. **25** He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. **26** As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. **27** A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. **28** But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. **29** For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never

whole cohort around him. **28** They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, **29** and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' **30** They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. **31** After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

nursed." **30** Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." **31** For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' **32** Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

When the gospel texts are placed side-by-side in this way, the differences between them become more striking: not only does the language of the texts differ, but the accounts vary significantly in what they tell us and - if we examine them more deeply - in the message they wish to convey.

**Exercise: What do you notice as you compare these texts in parallel?**

What similarities do you notice, for example, between the accounts of Matthew and Luke that you do not find in Mark?

How, do you think, these varied accounts reflect the possible intentions of their human authors?

The Johannine passion narrative differs in significant ways from the synoptic accounts: Barabbas is barely mentioned, except for the aside: 'They [the Jews] shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.'<sup>8</sup> But the interrogation by Annas, the 'father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year'<sup>9</sup> is more detailed, as is the account of Peter's betrayal of Jesus, which Mark and Luke also mention, though more simply.

**Exercise: Why, do you think, John places more emphasis on the behaviours of Annas and of Peter? What does he hope to show?<sup>10</sup>**

---

<sup>8</sup> John 18:40

<sup>9</sup> John 18:13

<sup>10</sup> You may find John 21 helpful

---

## The Resurrection Accounts

Just as the Passion Narratives differ each from the other, so do the accounts of Christ's Resurrection.

If you look at the Resurrection Parallels (Appendix A) the differences are striking, but this is not a reason to doubt their authenticity: we are compelled to recognise that these texts are a human account of an **utterly unfathomable experience**.

What the disciples of Jesus experienced was beyond their language and their recollection is passed on to us in somewhat fragmentary form.

Our familiarity with these stories makes it is easy for us to forget the **shock and wonder** felt by these disciples: no-one had ever risen from the dead, so - when they saw Jesus, and touched him and ate with him - they will surely have struggled to make sense of their experience.

Jesus did not just 'come back to life' - in other words, returning to the kind of life he had known before his crucifixion: resurrection is not a 'return to life' but a **transcending of death**. It is new life, not as a continuation of the old, but rather as life itself being taken up and transformed by the life of God.

This life of the Resurrection was not just for Jesus, but is the **life promised to us all**. The path that Jesus walked through death to resurrection is the path we too will walk.

**Exercise: Read and reflect upon the resurrection accounts (Appendix A).** What do you notice that distinguishes one account from another? How does this reflect the aims of the different evangelists?

---

## The Coming of the Spirit

Yet the journey on which the disciples had embarked had barely begun: they had seen him preach and teach, work miracles and heal those troubled in mind and body. They had witnessed the signs he performed and had fled<sup>11</sup> as he approached his death.

Their encounter with the risen Jesus was the sign and promise that this was not the end but - rather - the beginning.

All the evangelists tell how Christ commissioned the disciples to proclaim the Gospel yet, without the coming of the Spirit, these disciples remained frightened and frail.

In his second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, the author of Luke tells how the Spirit came:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush

---

<sup>11</sup> all except the women, and the beloved disciple

of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,



“I saw the Lord always before me,  
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;  
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;  
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

‘Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades,  
nor did his flesh experience corruption.”

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,  
‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising

God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.<sup>12</sup>

It was not only their encounters with the risen Jesus, but the **coming of the Spirit on the disciples** that transformed them from frightened figures hiding away to apostles proclaiming to the world at large what they had seen and heard.

This is the heart of the *kerygma*, the gospel message of Jesus. We can all lack courage in proclaiming Christ risen from the dead to the world around us, yet by the gift of the Spirit that is precisely what we can and **must** do - 'must', not only because it is our duty, but because we are compelled by the action of God's Spirit to proclaim the gospel of Christ to others.

**Exercise: What do these texts say to you in your heart?** How do they change how you feel about the gospel message and your role in sharing the *good news*?

---

<sup>12</sup> Acts 2