

Today's gospel reading – which is found only in the gospel of John – is one of the most well-known of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The first was to Mary Magdalen and the last was at the Ascension; however, in nearly all of them, Jesus was not recognised at first. Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener and it was only when he spoke her name that she knew who he was. Others thought he was a ghost, or were overcome with fear before he spoke to them.

How they reacted depended on who they were.

It's like everything else: we all have the same sense data 'out there' but we all, make something different of it. The world is 'all that is the case' as Wittgenstein said, *plus* our personal response and reaction to it. The world may be 'out there' but the world that each one of us lives in is 'in here' – and that's the more real world of the two.

This becomes clear when we look at our reaction to the present pandemic. We are all kept well-informed about the infection rate and the death rate and we're advised what to do during lockdown – and that's the world 'out there'; how we respond to it, is the world 'in here'. Some people are

more fearful than others, moving fearfully, looking out with fear-filled eyes above their masks, distancing themselves from others that extra few feet; this isn't judgement, it's just an observation, but it's probably because their inner understanding of the world is as a place of menace and danger. Others completely ignore government guidelines and even have barbecues or street parties – there were sixty of them in Manchester alone last week that the police had to break up; this is probably because their inner understanding of the world is as a place to enjoy yourself, have fun, whatever state it's in, and never mind anyone else.

It is the same with the resurrection of the Lord. The scriptural and theological facts are 'out there' but understanding of them will always be shaped by what's 'in here'.

For the Jews of the Diaspora, for Hellenistic and Greek-speaking Jews, the idea of a God descending, dying and rising, was not a difficult thing at all – they would have been very familiar with it from all the pagan religions myths around them. They would have understood the death and resurrection of Christ as essentially a myth come to life. In modern times, J.R.R. Tolkien was very keen for C.S. Lewis to

grasp this: that in Jesus Christ, the myth became a man. There are many great mythological themes that are – as the Roman writer Sallust said – *always and everywhere true*: the theme of the descending, dying and rising god, for example, is as old as time itself; or the Virgin Mother, giving birth to the divine Son. These were believed and incorporated into faith and worship long before Jesus was born. However, when Jesus *was* both, that myth became a man. In other words: the ultimate truth of the myth became the particular truth of matter.

However, the disciples in 1st century Judea were not this sophisticated, they did not have access to all these exotic Greek beliefs, so for them it was extremely important to stress the concrete, literal, concrete reality of the risen Jesus. Jesus talks and walks with them, he eats with them, he grills fish for them, he shares bread with them, Thomas puts his fingers in his wounds and his hand in his side. Above all it is an profoundly *physical* experience.

In later centuries, when men of limited imagination thought that a myth was something unreal, they dismissed the physical resurrection of Jesus as nonsense; others turned him

into a South American freedom-fighter. It's always been the same: what is 'out there' is perceived and interpreted by what is 'in here'.

Having mentioned Tolkien, I want to return to him and to his personal perception and interpretation of the facts of Christ's life, death and resurrection. He wrote many letters to his son Christopher, who served in the RAF during World War II – and some of them were about the Eucharist as a continuing substantial presence in the world of the risen and ascended Christ. The resurrection and the Eucharist are intimately connected. In one letter he writes:

“Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament (...). There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth, and more than that: Death.

(...)

"The only cure for sagging or fainting faith is Communion. Though always itself, perfect and complete and inviolate, the Blessed Sacrament does not operate completely and once for

all in any of us. Like the act of Faith it must be continuous and grow by exercise.

“Also I can recommend this as an exercise: make your Communion in circumstances that affront your taste. Choose a snuffling or a gabbling priest or a proud and vulgar friar; and a church full of the usual crowd of noisy children, to those who, the moment the tabernacle is opened, sit back and yawn; the unkempt and the dirty-necked – go to Communion with them.

“It will be just the same (or probably better than that) as a Mass said beautifully by a visibly holy man and shared by a few devout and decorous people.”