

Resurrection

Easter Term, 2017

30th April 2017, Revd Dr Simon Perry, Resurrection and the Death of God

7th May 2017, Prof Morna Hooker, The Resurrection – What Kind of Evidence?

21st May 2017, Revd Dr Simon Perry, Lazarus and Resurrection

Prof Judith Lieu, Robinson Graduation

Revd Dr Simon Perry

Resurrection and the Death of God

30th April 2017

In first Century Palestine, Messiahs were not seen as divine figures, but as human liberators. If there's one thing they all promised, it was strength and stability. Strong and stable leadership needs three things: strength, stability, and a message of strength and stability. That's what people want from a Messiah. But what they got was Jesus of Nazareth – who was clearly reluctant to accept the title Messiah – because he provided neither strength nor stability, nor a message of strength and stability.

He didn't seem to provide strength, because that was the job of one man and one man only: the Chief Priest, and King Herod, and Pontius Pilate and ultimately, the Roman Emperor. He certainly did not provide stability... at one rally, his speech included the manifesto pledge, 'I have not come to bring stability, but division.' (Lk 12:49-53). He stood in front of one of the planet's most ancient, strong and stable institutions, and promised it would soon be reduced to a heap of smoldering rubble (Lk 21:6) And he told his devotees they should de-stabilize themselves, take up their cross and follow him (Lk 9:23). And of course, we know where the story goes. Jesus said 'follow me', and marched straight to his own downfall, trial, and death. Not much in the way of strength, or stability, or leadership. The. End.

The death of Christ, meant not only the demise of a would-be revolutionary dissident from beyond the boundaries of acceptability. For those who had followed him, it was the death of God himself. Not just the little bit of God that was incarnated into the person of Jesus – but the God of the up there, and the beyond and the ultimate. This way of reading events, was part of the "Death of God" Theology popularized in the 1960s and undergoing something of a revival today. It didn't quite mean that the death of Jesus meant the death of the whole of God – because God is replaced with the Holy Spirit, the social glue that holds humanity together – so that God is reduced to interpersonal relationships: to the church, the collective, the nation etc. If God is alive, it's in the same way that John Brown is alive – John's brown's body lies a-rotting in the grave, but his soul goes marching on ... each time people get together to fight for justice. God becomes a way of describing human interaction...

The trouble is ... when you read the resurrection accounts within their narrative context, an entirely different story emerges. Sure – we can say that the whole of God, the Big Other, the power up there in the sky that confers meaning upon our lives is dead. But being left with the Holy Spirit is not the same as being left with the human Spirit. For this "Death of God" crowd, the resurrection is just the wishful thinking of a bunch of unreflective, gullible and moronic peasants who could not adjust to the new reality. But that inability to accept uncomfortable realities is today, regarded as an evolutionary survival mechanism.

Why facts don't change our minds [taken from this article in the New Yorker]:

In 1975, researchers at Stanford invited a group of undergraduates to take part in a study about suicide. They were presented with pairs of suicide notes. In each pair, one note had been composed by a random individual, the other by a person who had subsequently taken his own life. The students were then asked to distinguish between the genuine notes and the fake ones. Some students discovered that they had a genius for the task. Out of twenty-five pairs of notes, they correctly identified the real one twenty-four times. Others discovered that they were hopeless. They identified the real note in only ten instances.

As is often the case with psychological studies, the whole setup was a put-on. The students who'd been told they were almost always right were, on average, no more discerning than those who had been told they were mostly wrong.

In the final phase of the study, after the deception was revealed, the students were asked to estimate how many suicide notes they had actually categorized correctly, and how many they thought an average student would get right. At this point, something curious happened. The students in the high-score group said that they thought they had, in fact, done quite well—significantly better than the average student—even though, as they'd just been told, they had zero grounds for believing this. Conversely, those who'd been assigned to the low-score group said that they thought they had done significantly worse than the average student—a conclusion that was equally unfounded.

The authors concluded that 'even after the evidence "for their beliefs has been totally refuted, people fail to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs," the researchers noted.'

What does resurrection have to do with this? The phrase, 'Christ is risen', is perhaps the most decontextualized and misinterpreted phrase since the unfortunate command, 'Smell my Spaniel.' Heard in context, resurrection does indeed mean a little more than a conjuring trick with bones.

The 'Death of God' philosophers today, are quite keen to point out that the God who died on the cross of Christianity is not only the Christian belief in the God up there beyond the skies. It's every human conception of a 'Big Other' that helps us feel secure about our place in the universe. That Big Other could be the Christian God, or it could be Science, or Nature, or Meaning or Purpose, it could even be the Great Absence of God which is every bit as much a projection as the existence of God. Christianity, it is argued, is distinctive because in the cross – it deprives us of any Big Other, any great figure, or overarching metanarrative, or eternal truth. Everything, all of it, anything that grants us stability or certainty or security is destroyed, leaving us with the horrific sense of utter absence and loss.

Unfortunately, and all-too-quickly, Christians interpret the resurrection story as God waving a cosmic magic wand to provide us with the make-believe assurance that it's okay, everything is alright, God is not dead and there really is stability and purpose and truth after all. Yes, the crucifixion was a terrible thing – but it's okay because the delay between Good Friday and Easter Sunday is only about as long as waiting time in A and E, – that way you don't have to wait too long for a Happy Ending, isn't that Good News! The trouble is none of that takes the cross seriously. I remember a book called, "It's Friday but Sunday's Comin'." That is, it's bleak for a while, but don't worry about the death of Christ, it's just part of a transaction, and God will soon be back in charge. Hence we go and celebrate Easter. As I saw in one church magazine this year, Holy Week climaxed with an event called, "Easter Fun." Easter. Fun. Probably not a sentiment expressed by anyone who experienced that first Easter event!

No, resurrection was not a secret antidote to the death of God. Resurrection offers no short cut around the horror of loss, no happy ending, no comforting restoration of strength and stability. No – resurrection is something far more disturbing. Resurrection is the climax of theme running through the entirety of the biblical narrative – that of Israel being broken and remade differently. At the personal level, at the national level, and now at the divine level – being broken down and radically reconstituted. Suffering and vindication, destroyed and reconstituted, broken and remade. In Christian Theology this pattern of death and resurrection is the business of the Holy Spirit.

So, if the death of God leaves Christians only with the Holy Spirit – it means that the Holy Spirit becomes the only source of strength and stability. But the Spirit of resurrection is a spirit that pulls the rug from beneath your feet – a spirit in the business of breaking and remaking. The studies from Stanford have since been confirmed by countless other studies around the world, which tend to conclude that group-think is natural, that confirmation-bias is a universal human trait, that basic tribalism is a characteristic found in every walk of life, rich and poor, no matter how well or poorly educated we are.

The resurrection is the break up of our certainties, our group think, our tribalism. It is perpetual and radical exposure to human vulnerability and fallibility – and experiencing God within that. According to the New Testament, Christians have the capacity to be broken and remade, to be exposed to the resurrecting work of the Holy Spirit. It is clearly for this reason, that Christians have such a stunning reputation for humility and openness...

I can't help thinking of the question, 'How many light bulbs does it take to change a Christian?' How many times do Christians need to be exposed to holiness, in order for their view of God and the world and the self to be transformed?

To say 'I believe in the resurrection' is to claim that you have the capacity for your worldview to be broken down and remade.

To say, 'I believe in the resurrection' is to claim that you can escape your natural desire for confirmation-bias.

To say, 'I believe in the resurrection' is to abandon all desire for strength and stability, to abandon the message of strength and stability,

and to seek God in the midst of instability and nothingness,

to seek the still small voice of God in the midst of the noise and the shouting and the chaos of rival bids for power,

to cultivate an attentive disposition so that the divine voice may be encountered in unexpected ways, amidst unexpected circumstances, from unexpected people.

Prof Morna Hooker

The Resurrection – What Kind of Evidence?

May 7th 2017

Jonah 3: 10–4:11

Mark 16:1-8

‘The women went out and ran from the tomb, trembling with amazement, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.’

What an extraordinary way to end a book! Those of you who struggle regularly

to compose essays for your supervisors will know that one of the rules of good essay-writing is to come up with a strong conclusion. Whatever you do don't just peter out.

What, then, are we to make of the ending of Mark's Gospel? It sounds, for all the world, as though he ran out of steam – or perhaps he simply ran out of time. Three weeks after Easter Day, we are still, as it were, waiting for the end of the story. Surely these cannot be Mark's final words? In our printed Bibles there are, indeed, two more paragraphs, but they were certainly not written by Mark himself, for they are missing from our earliest manuscripts, and neither their style nor vocabulary is Mark's. Clearly other people, long ago, agreed that this was a strange way to end a Gospel, and decided to round it off with a nice tidy ending.

So why did Mark stop writing where he did? Did he in fact stop there? It's sometimes been argued that the original copy of the Gospel contained something more, and that the ending was lost; perhaps mice got into the church cupboard and chewed the end off! Or perhaps he was prevented from completing it: could he perhaps have been martyred before he had a chance to bring his story to a triumphant conclusion?

But what we have of Mark's work ends abruptly, and perhaps he ended where he meant to. So was he simply a clumsy author, who didn't know how to round his story off satisfactorily? Did he run out of material? Or did he end in this way for a deliberate purpose?

When we start to analyze Mark's final sentence, things seem to get worse, for he ends his Gospel – a book which claims to be telling us good news – with the statement that the women were overcome by trembling and fear. Is that what we expect from people who have just been given the Easter message? Surely they should have been overcome by joy – and if you look at Matthew's version of this story you will find that this is precisely what he tells us. But Mark ends with the bleak statement 'they were afraid'. Moreover, the women apparently fail to deliver the message that they have been commissioned to pass on to the disciples. They said nothing to anyone', says Mark. The Gospel ends with fear and failure. And with no account of any resurrection appearance.

And this, surely, is the remarkable thing about Mark's ending. The other Gospels all end with a meeting between Jesus and his disciples, but Mark seems to break off before he reaches the end of the story – breaks off with a promise that the disciples will see Jesus, but with no tangible proof that he has in fact risen. Like one of those modern novels that seems to stop in the middle, he keeps us guessing, wondering what happened next. Did the

women ever deliver the message? Did the disciples make their way to Galilee? And if so, did they see Jesus when they arrived?

Even what Mark does tell us is full of unanswered questions. Who had rolled away the stone from the tomb, and how had they done it? Who was the young man sitting by the tomb, and why was he dressed in white? He told the women that Jesus' body was not in the tomb – but was he speaking the truth? Did anybody ever check? Why should the disciples be sent off to Galilee? The obvious place for Jesus to show himself was in Jerusalem. And if the women said nothing to anyone, how did anyone ever hear what had happened that Sunday morning? Was the whole story merely a rumour?

Mark's ending provides us with no concrete evidence. Why should we believe this message that Jesus has been raised from the dead, when it was delivered by an unknown person to a few women – who were, incidentally, according to Jewish law, not considered capable of giving testimony in court? We expect something better from the writer of a Gospel.

After all, people who claimed to be speaking the truth used to swear that what they said was 'Gospel truth'; the Gospels, it was assumed, were giving us reliable evidence, facts that could not be disputed. What kind of evidence is Mark offering us?

But 'Gospel truth' is not quite so straight-forward as people once supposed, for what the Gospels offer us is not a list of facts which are self-evidently true, but a series of stories that can be interpreted in different ways – stories which the evangelists think amount to being 'good news', and which they invite us to see in the same way.

Think of some of the stories Mark tells us earlier in his Gospel. Jesus cures sick people; how does he do it? His enemies say he is working in the power of Satan, but Jesus claims that it is in the power of the Spirit of God. He teaches with great authority. When asked who gave him this authority, he claims that it was God himself, but his enemies have a different answer – he is, they say, uttering blasphemy.

Now we have a story of an empty tomb. Why is it empty? One possible answer is that someone has come and removed the body; Mark's answer is that Jesus has been raised from the dead. But here, as everywhere else in his Gospel, Mark tells his story and leaves us to make up our own minds about the answer. If we want clear proof, we are not going to find it.

And, of course, we cannot expect to find it. Even in the scientific world, it is rare to be offered clear proof of a belief – and again and again, experimenters have found their assumptions challenged by later investigation.

Even if Mark had done what the other evangelists do, and told a story of how people met the Risen Jesus, that would not be cast-iron evidence for the resurrection. We could accept the evidence of those who claimed to have seen him; or we could conclude that they were the victims of hallucination, or even the perpetrators of some kind of fraud. The kind of evidence we would like just isn't available.

So perhaps our unease with this story is due to the fact that we expect to find the wrong things here. Let's take another look at some of its mysterious features. The young man reminds the women of Jesus' earlier promise to go

before them into Galilee. Now they must set off there. Why? Well, everything else Jesus told them would happen has happened. If his betrayal and death took place as he said, why should he not have been right about the rest of the story?

But there is only one way to find out whether he was, and that is to go to Galilee. If they sit around in Jerusalem, nothing will happen. But if they believe Jesus' promise and set off to Galilee, where Jesus first called them to follow him, they will see him. Is this the message that Mark wants his readers to grasp? If they want to see the risen Jesus, they must respond in faith to his summons. Disbelievers will never see him, but those who believe and follow him on the path of discipleship will meet him.

The women, Mark tells us, were overcome with terror. If we are surprised by that, then perhaps it is because we have heard the story of the resurrection too many times. Imagine that you are hearing it for the first time: if it is true, then it is the most extraordinary demonstration of God's power. Of course the women are afraid. Joy comes later; for the moment they are overwhelmed by what has happened.

And they said nothing to anyone! It would seem that the women failed to deliver the message – a strange way, indeed, to end a Gospel! And yet it clearly wasn't the end of the story, or Mark wouldn't be telling it. We can only conclude that the power which was able to raise Jesus from the dead overcame their fear and opened their mouths. This 'good news' is able to deal with human failure.

Why doesn't Mark tell us what happened when the message was eventually delivered and the disciples finally saw Jesus? Could it be because he knows that stories about empty tombs and appearances cannot provide the kind of evidence that his readers need to persuade them of the resurrection? You can argue about them all day, and be no wiser. Could it be because he knows that they may distract us from something far more important?

Like those modern novelists who seem to leave the readers to finish the story for themselves, Mark leaves his readers to complete the narrative. Did you notice, in our Old Testament reading, how the book of Jonah ends with a question mark? We turn the page, expecting to discover the answer, but find nothing. We're meant to answer the question for ourselves. And in the same way, Mark challenges us to action. By breaking off with that challenge to set out in faith, he offers us the way to discover the only evidence that can persuade anyone to believe that Jesus has been raised – the opportunity to meet him for ourselves. For the only proof of the resurrection comes from responding to the Gospel in faith, and in personal encounter. The Easter story wasn't concluded on Easter Day: it had only just begun. If Mark's story seems unfinished, then it is because he expects us to complete it for ourselves.

Revd Dr Simon Perry

Lazarus and Resurrection

21st May 2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Jn. 11:(1)32-44

'I have no plans to call a general election.' 'There will be no snap general election before 2020.' Flashback to all the times Theresa May said a snap election was a terrible idea – until she didn't, reports The New Statesman recently. 'It's about that essential question of the trust that people can have in their politicians' she says. Trust? It so often seems to be all smoke and mirrors, all fake news and lies. How do you know what to believe when we have lies about Brexit, about NHS funding, about deflection by focussing on another party's blackhole calculations?

What about believing a sensational headline such as: Dead man walks! What sort of Anastasis, that is, resurrection, is this? This story about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; what should we make of that? Is it so outlandish that it's unbelievable, all fake news and lies? Or is it so off the wall that it has to be 100% real?

The media and powers that be, have us believe what they want us to believe, whether it's the truth or fake news and lies. We become drawn into the stories, thinking we have a choice in what to believe. Even with fake news. It's what the media do, it's what politicians do, and it's what the Pharisees did. This most significant sign that Jesus performed won him many followers, who came to believe in who he was, and because of the countless other deeds and signs he had performed. Was this all fake? Had he fooled everyone?

In gaining evermore followers Jesus was clearly a threat to the structure of society, and raising Lazarus, Anastasis pre-empted, was the last straw. It's an unbelievable and amazing thing that happened to Lazarus, and the Pharisees don't actually dispute or deny what happened; in fact, they very much believed it was true. But this last act becomes one of the principle reasons for the authorities wanting him out of the way. It became increasingly apparent that Jesus wasn't mounting a political-style revolution, and the theologian Tom Wright states 'The victory Jesus intends to win will be won by self-giving love, not by normal revolutionary means.' But in doing what he did he usurped the Chief Priests, and they clearly didn't like it one jot. It unsettled them, unnerved them. There was a lot at stake. To believe the well-being of the nation needed to be preserved was a lie; it was for their own positions of power and prestige. Rejecting anything that doesn't fit with their high-ranking, nice, comfortable life-style, and their safe position, both within their own nation and with the ruling Roman Empire. So, it's either Jesus, or the nation. Not that they thought very much of their own nation, their own people, anyway. The Pharisees looked down their noses and sniffed dismissively at the common crowd; the rabble don't even know their law. They consider themselves superior to the common people. They know their Torah and it suits them that most people wouldn't even understand it. Rather like many politicians then, and their surreptitious ability to keep much of the general public in total ignorance; to maintain the smoke and mirrors effect, to offer unrealistic manifestos based on lies, whilst protecting their own interests. Yes, that's definitely about that essential question of the trust that people can have in their politicians! So, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept truth even when it bops us on the nose.

So, what of this Gospel narrative itself and where do we find any truth in that? The author invites us into what is a very intimate story; a story that although connected with the bigger picture of what God is doing in the world, is also a story on a much more personal level. We are invited to share in it, to become part of it, to be challenged by it in

delving beneath the obvious face-value to the depths of the under-currant running through it, to defend the truth; but we still need to make up our own minds about what that truth is.

The raising of Lazarus is one of the most powerful and moving stories in the whole Bible. Powerful because Jesus not only foreshadows his own destiny, Anastasis personified, he also demonstrates the awesome and unfathomable power of God, and that God is master, even over humanity's most powerful and overwhelming enemy, death. And its powerful because he didn't come waltzing in, saying 'everything's fine, not to worry, I'm here now, business as usual', like something akin to what Basil out of Faulty Towers might have said, and then sets about winding up some cosmic crankshaft into immediate action. It's a story which is both unbelievable and uncompromising. But is it fake? Lazarus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary, were some of Jesus's best friends. Lazarus was ill and died, and Jesus chose to remain where he was for a further two days. What sort of a friend would do that? So, when he eventually rocks up, Martha rushes out to meet him, and naturally expresses her grief and anger, 'If you'd been here he wouldn't have died.' Wouldn't he? What does she mean by that? Lazarus had already been dead in the tomb for four days (v17), so he died way before Jesus had a chance to get there. Is he for real? Or did Martha mean that if Jesus had actually been physically there he could have prevented it? After all, he was performing many other signs (they're never called miracles) all over the place for random people, and these were some of his most special friends. The scientist and theologian, John Polkinghorne talks of 'the deep-seated human intuition of hope.' Both Martha and Mary said 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.' Such was their belief, trust and hope in who this friend of theirs was.

There has been understandable speculation over time about whether Lazarus was indeed really dead, or just in some sort of coma or something. Truth or lies? A few years ago, the Bolton Footballer, Fabrice Muamba's heart stopped for 78 minutes. The wonderful medical staff were fortunately able to bring him back to life. Just in case there's any doubt, 2000 years ago they didn't have electric-shock machines or defibrillators. Lazarus was properly dead. The fact that Martha points out that there is already a stench leaves us in no doubt about this. Decomposing, decaying, putrefying. Dead.

Jesus finds himself surrounded by grief, and is greatly disturbed and deeply moved at the mourning and distress he witnesses around him. 'Show me where he's laid' Jesus said, and then began to weep himself. There is no doubt among theologians, and others, about this being a historical truth, because the early church would either have left it out or not invented it at all in light of Jesus being venerated in his own Anastasis, his own victory over death. God in Jesus cries with the world; God the Word made flesh, feels anguish and pain. But what else could Jesus have been weeping about? Yes, the grief felt at the death of his friend, but if he knew what God would do through him in raising Lazarus again to life so that they would see the glory of God and that God had sent him, why would he feel that level of grief? Was it regret at not showing up earlier and having to witness the extent and depth of the grief and distress in those he encountered? It's perhaps reasonable to assume he might also have been grieving over his own impending death, and all that that signified. The death of God Incarnate. God signing his own death warrant, for the sake of saving not only Israel, but delivering the whole world from its own dilapidated doom and fate. Is it fake that God has unwavering and absolute love for the world?

Jesus sets not just Lazarus free from death itself, but in the process, invites us as well as Mary to look to the future. He brings the future and the past into the present. He makes it explicit that this resurrection the Jews talk about is not an event at some distant point in the future. It's worth noting that some of the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, but most Jews did at this time. In Jesus is the resurrection; the resurrection is Jesus, and it is here and now. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die', is commonly quoted at Christian funerals. Jesus is the end of time being brought into the middle of time, the beginning of time being brought into the middle of time, and the middle of time being brought into the here and now. The past, present and future tied up together, in this time within time. This

time that is God's time, not our time. Perhaps the truth of this can offer some timely semblance of peace and reassurance for students who have submission deadlines looming, or revising for imminent exams, and are more than likely feeling like some duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed platypus right now, not knowing whether their head still belongs to the rest of their body with the sheer pressure and demands of life.

Perhaps it is after all about that essential question of the trust that people can have in Jesus. The Greek word Anastasis means resurrection, or raising up, and the female diminutive is Natassa, so Happy Birthday Natassa; Happy Birthday Resurrection. A new day has birthed, and the resurrected Jesus invites us to leave the fake darkness, the lie of the darker forces of this world, the night of bitter tears, pain and anguish, to enter into the truth of a new life of light and love and joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

True resurrection is a living experience, in the renewal of body, mind and spirit.

True resurrection is the reversal of the verdict that humanity passed on God's son.

True resurrection is the belief and hope which lies not just in some future event when Jesus Christ will return again; but the life a Christian lives in the here and now is a life which is already in possession of the life which is eternal.

Christos anesti – Christ is risen!

Robinson Graduation

Professor Judith Lieu

Have you finished packing? Or are you despairing before you have even started? Where in three short years did so much stuff come from? All of it recording the rich variety of your Cambridge years. How do you decide what to throw away; what to take back with you? What do you need for the next stage, or won't you know until you take it?

In a year's time I shall have to move out of my Faculty room, and I've begun to look in despair at the stuffed filing cabinets, the creaking shelves. Agendas and papers from long-forgotten committees are easily dealt with; so too are innumerable drafts of students' dissertations; data protection and freedom of information legislation means I no longer have sheets of cryptic comments on assessed essays and examination scripts — although that does make writing references for almost-forgotten tutees a challenge. But what about this? An essay I wrote during my first year at University, neatly filed with the notes from lectures and reading that helped me write it or revise for exams that summer. One question mark, two grammar corrections and the comment, 'Quite thoughtful and discerning in places, but too diffuse and too much irrelevant material'. It — with much more of the same — has accompanied me through countless moves, half way round the world and then back again. It hasn't, I hasten to say, provided the script for the lectures I have given ever since.

Why kept? For fear of losing all this knowledge, acquired with such effort? Because, despite that two-edged comment it set me on a path to where I am now? A reminder of what I knew, if I discarded this would I be in some way diminished? Without it would I lose the anchor and reassurance of the building blocks of my identity?

I am not suggesting I have had such existential reflections every time I repacked my belongings — your visits to supervisors' rooms probably demonstrated that for academics lethargy is always easier than sorting through the detritus from the past. And you have the advantage of being able to transfer to a memory stick — a wonderful term — the notes along with the photos and selfies, and to carry them around with you until the software fails, and memory is reduced to a complex piece of plastic and metal, which can't even be recycled.

It is a matter of debate whether remembering is what distinguishes us from other forms of animal life, but it does certainly shape, make, us as individuals and as groups. It is a truism that the loss of photos and personal memorabilia in flood or fire can never be compensated by any form of insurance, any promise of cash 'to help you get by and start again'.

Begin the sentence, 'A people/a person without memory', and you will provoke an avalanche of conclusions, all according to Google uttered by the great and the good: is a tree without roots; is a people without a future; is a people without a culture.

Such sentiments may reassure those of us who work in the Humanities; whereas it is often supposed that the sciences have no need to justify themselves and their consumption of national resources, the value of the Humanities is a topic of never satisfied anxiety, for parents as well as for politicians - and the punch-line that Mark Zuckerberg studied Classics at school and once quoted the Aeneid in a Facebook products Conference may have limited persuasive effect. More positively we appeal to the impoverishment of spirit, even the loss of identity, that results where the dialogue with the past, in history, arts, literature, is lost.

As a Theologian or Historian of Early Christianity most of my attention is directed to remembering. Religions, mostly, are in the business of creating, preserving and recreating memory. They perform acts of remembering, in words and texts, in argument and polemic, in ritual and practice, in liturgy, music and drama, in dress and story. Such acts of remembering create communities that survive through time in extraordinary ways, often against the odds. It is not just religions that perform remembering, as any member of this University knows, with all its reminders of 800 years, and as events such as today demonstrate. We also live in an age of fears that rapid change means we are losing the memory that makes us, an age of rallying calls to 'make Britain great again', an age of turning the blame on newcomers with different memories. As a specialist in religion I cannot afford to be dewy-eyed and naive about the power of remembering. A fixation on the past, a determination to preserve it and recreate it in defiance of the changing world about us swiftly becomes destructive of human flourishing. Many of the deepest and most vicious of divisions in the present claim as their authority conflicting narratives of the past, alternative modes of remembering. Remembering should not be an act of freezing the past and ourselves in it, but of providing a space for a critical dialogue that offers a direction for the future.

Our reading from Isaiah, written over 2 and a half millennia ago captures the challenge:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

These words were addressed to people who had been forcibly migrated from their home country, hundreds of miles away; displaced by war and defeat, facing an uncertain future, with a new generation almost literally rootless. What gave them identity was remembering – the stories of rescue from Egypt, of miraculous defeat of enemy forces and successful journeying through the wilderness, of settling in a new land. Yet the prophet urges his audience to let go of the past, because only by letting go will they be free to face the future. The irony is that the future he promises them is not a denial of the past but a reconfiguration of it: wilderness and rivers, wild animals and sustenance will again be its markers, for him because there is a consistency in the God who remains constant even through the inevitable wildernesses ahead.

Returning to those defences of the Humanities. Too often it is said that the value of History is so that we might learn from it: as if we were not now different people and in a different place. Challenging those wise sayings about a people without a memory Nietzsche wrote an essay on the Uses and Disadvantages of history for life; evoking the terror of having total recall of all the chaotic impressions on our senses, he protested that it is possible, almost, to live without memory, but without forgetting it is impossible to live.

If I have made any progress in research and teaching it is because I have forgotten this essay and all the 'knowledge' fixed therein. I did wonder whether to burn it as a symbolic gesture of forgetting, but I feared that that might provoke the chaplain to perform some ritual act with the fire extinguisher whose deeper meaning I would then have to weave into this address.

Today will be a truly memorable occasion; you have been shaped as a community of shared memory, and the part you have played will be woven into the remembering which creates a College; the Alumni Office will do all they can to ensure you do not forget Robinson and your time here. More important, though, whatever you take, whatever you leave, remember, and forget, critically, creatively, for the future.