

A GREAT EARTHQUAKE

Genesis 1.1-2.4a
 Exodus 14. 10-15. 1a
 Isaiah 55. 1-11
 Zephaniah 3. 14-20
 Romans 6. 3-11
 Matthew 28. 1-10

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

The Holy Land is a region where earthquakes occur frequently. By one means or another, substantial earthquakes have been documented in that part of the world for more than 4,000 years. References to earthquakes in the Holy Land can be found in historical accounts and in biblical and other literature. But evidence about Holy Land earthquakes has also been discovered thanks to archaeological excavations. Research recently conducted by scientists from the German Research Centre for Geosciences has shown, for example, that at least two major earthquakes occurred in the area adjacent to the Dead Sea. There was a widespread earthquake in 31 B.C. and an early first-century seismic event that happened sometime between 26 A.D. and 36 A.D.

I mention these scientifically recorded earthquakes for a reason. You may not have noticed it, but earthquakes figure prominently in the events of the Passion Story. Last week on Passion Sunday, you will remember that the Palm Gospel was read during the Mass. From St Matthew's Gospel, we heard that when our Lord died on the cross, 'the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many' (27. 51-53).¹ The tombs that are referred to here are the tombs of Israelite saints, surrounding the city of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. They were opened

¹ Cf. Ezek 37. 11-14. This event may be a partial fulfilment of the vision given to Ezekiel.
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as Jesus died; and the resurrected saints remained in their tombs until after his resurrection. The message here is clear. The death of Christ is not some sort of mathematical ‘minus’ that was ultimately negated or reversed by his resurrection; no, on that same day, the radical life-changing, dead-raising power of God was released.² And the earth shook in order to call everyone’s attention to what was accomplished that day at Calvary.

There is more: for we have the Gospel reading that is given for this evening’s Easter Vigil. It tells us that when Mary Magdalene and Mary went to the tomb of our Lord on the first day of the week, ‘suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone (of Christ’s tomb) and sat on it’ (28. 2). St Matthew wants us to understand that this earthquake is linked to the one that happened at Jesus’s death: both earthquakes signal events that are not only decisive for human history, but are also of eternal significance. Indeed, once the stone of the tomb has been rolled away, the angel announces to the women that Christ ‘is not here, for he has been raised’. These earthquakes occurred so that those who were present at the time, and all of us who have read about them since, will focus on what God has done for his people. They are there in the Passion stories so that we will pay attention.

Now as you know, earthquakes are generally very destructive phenomena. Only last year, earthquakes took a great toll on life and property in Taiwan, Ecuador, Italy and Indonesia; and this year, we have already had reports of severe earthquakes in Italy and New Guinea. We tend to fear earthquakes because of the damage that they can cause.

But the earthquakes described in the Passion accounts were not of the damaging sort. Have you noticed? Rather than destroying property and taking lives, they were

² Cf. 1 Cor 15. 20-23.

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accompanied by signs of *new life*. At the crucifixion of our Lord, Jewish saints were raised from the dead; and when the angel arrived from heaven to roll away the stone, it was so that the women (and all of the disciples who would follow them later) could see with their own eyes that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. Earthquakes that are accompanied by new life – now there's an interesting headline for the newspapers!

I must confess that I was disturbed when I read last week that according to a recent survey commissioned by the BBC, one-quarter of people who describe themselves as Christians in Great Britain do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I am not, of course, denying people the right to hold the religious beliefs and convictions that they choose. But if this statistic is correct, it means that many Christian people in the UK have (for whatever reason) deprived themselves of one of the fundamental and powerful truths that anchor Christian belief. The resurrection of Christ is tremendously significant for a number of reasons:

Firstly, the empty tomb conclusively established the credibility of our Lord and his teaching. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was challenged to prove himself to his sceptics. Many signs and wonders had been accomplished by Christ, but his opponents persisted in their unbelief. At last, our Lord refused to grant further signs other than one final demonstration of his power, that of his resurrection from the grave.

Secondly, the resurrection attested to the integrity of Jesus and assured people of his identity as the Son of God. It was Christ's claim to be the Son of God which was the basis for his condemnation by the Jewish Sanhedrin.³ The resurrection was God's way of publicly overruling the verdict of the Sanhedrin and testifying that our Lord is indeed the Son of God, as he claimed.

³ Cf. Lk 22. 70, Jn 19. 7.

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Thirdly, the resurrection demonstrated Jesus's ability to save. Throughout his earthly life and ministry, Christ had spoken of himself as the one who had come 'to seek and to save that which was lost.'⁴ While the cross demonstrates the love of our Lord and his willingness to save men, the empty tomb reveals the power of Jesus and his ability to save.

Fourthly, the resurrection provides Christians with a measure of the power which is at work in us to enable us to live the Christian life. To quote St Paul, 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you.'⁵ God gives us the ability to do whatever he commands; and the resurrection is the measure of the power which is at work in us.

And finally, the fact that our Lord is our risen Saviour gives Christians a hope which extends beyond the grave. Thanks be to God: we are not limited by the finite life that we have been given on this earth. As St John wrote, 'And this is what (the Son of God) has promised us, eternal life.'⁶ Dear friends, the resurrection of Jesus means that we, with all of the members of the Church of God (past, present and future) can joyfully proclaim, 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'.⁷ This eternal truth is earth-shaking news indeed!

Amen.

⁴ Cf. Lk 19. 10; Mk 10. 45; Jn 10. 10-11.

⁵ Cf. Rom 8. 11.

⁶ Cf. 1 Jn 2. 25.

⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 15. 54.

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