



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – April 2008

### An Absent Body and a Present Body

**T**WELVE YEARS ago, in a *Church Times* article, Archbishop Rowan Williams, then still a bishop in Wales, had this to say:

*The two great themes of the Gospel narratives of the resurrection are the absence of Jesus's body where it should be, and the presence of Jesus's body where it is not expected to be.*

The resurrection of Jesus is not just the absent body, the empty tomb – important though that piece of evidence was – but the encounter with Jesus, alive and risen from the dead, a body present 'where it is not expected to be'. Again, we are dealing with a piece of evidence: this is more than one or two people seeing visions. Whole groups of people saw him: ten (John 20:19), eleven (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:34; John 20:26), more than 500 (1 Corinthians 15:5). We may even have the slight inconsistency which is a sign of genuine evidence: St Paul, presumably mistakenly, refers to the apostolic band as 'the Twelve' (1 Corinthians 15:5), forgetting, perhaps, that at that stage – the Resurrection appearances – Judas Iscariot is dead and the lot has not yet fallen on Matthias.

Some people weren't – and aren't – convinced by the absence of Jesus's body from the tomb. Other people weren't – and aren't – convinced by the apostles' witness to his presence in their midst. No change here: we live in a society of doubters, where people continue to ask for more and more proof. The presence of Jesus's body where it is not expected, nowadays, is in our churches: the gathering of God's people, the Word of God proclaimed and received, the Peace shared, Holy Communion, and the abiding presence of the Risen Christ in the tabernacle. As the hymn says: 'Thou art here we ask not how!' But it is not only there. We also meet Jesus – indeed we meet him specially - in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25). Not surprisingly, we have Christians who are particularly convinced and 'discipled' by their encounter with Christ at Mass. We have other Christians for whom God's activity in the world is the convincing sign of Jesus's presence in our midst. They see the work of faithful Christians in charity work, in education, in government, in health, in social welfare and realise that the Risen Christ is powerfully at work, assisting us to do the Father's will and hastening the coming Kingdom. A body is made up of many necessary parts (1 Corinthians 12), all of which have a part to play: we need our different gifts.

Personally I am convinced by the empty tomb story: it would have been so easy otherwise to disprove the apostles' claims. I am even more convinced by the stories of Christ's presence. Not only are the appearances to his disciples for me convincing. No less convincing is the experience of Christians through the centuries of God's faithfulness in and through the Eucharistic mystery and in and through the sacrificial life and work of Christians.

May God bless you and reveal his love to you as you continue to celebrate Easter.

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