

## **Caterpillars, butterflies and the resurrection of Jesus**

**Sermon given at All Saints' church, Nottingham, on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2018 by Rev Christopher Harrison**

Spring finally appears to have come, or at least it had done so yesterday. One of the signs that the weather has taken a turn for the better is that we start to see butterflies again after the long, cold winter months. Yesterday I saw two, a Peacock and a Brimstone, which reminded me how amazing it is that at least some of these wonderful little creatures always manage to survive the near-freezing temperatures which we experience for several weeks in most years. Butterflies go into a dormant state during these periods (which is not the same as hibernation); depending on the species in question, this can happen at the stage of the egg, the caterpillar, the pupa or chrysalis, or the adult butterfly.

But let's reflect for a moment on those four states. When the change from each of those states takes place, the transformation that takes place is truly remarkable. The tiny egg hatches into a larva, or caterpillar, whose life consists almost exclusively in eating and avoiding being eaten (which isn't easy). Before long, a shell will form around the caterpillar which is the chrysalis, or pupa: within the chrysalis a remarkable metamorphosis will take place, in which the limbs, organs and tissues of the caterpillar will all be changed: finally the adult butterfly will push itself out of its shell-like cage, its new wings will unfold, blood will be pumped into them, and the little creature will soon fly off. The process is truly remarkable; an ugly little bug that clings to leaves and eats them becomes transformed into something that knows instinctively how to fly, with its former colours being replaced by what are often intricate and colourful designs on its new wings.

Of course this is just one example of the remarkable transformations that we see in nature, which we can so easily take for granted or not even notice. Insects other than butterflies and moths also undergo similarly spectacular metamorphoses when moving from one stage of the cycle to another. When trees are shedding their leaves in the autumn, you can often already see the buds developing that will resist all the frost and snow of winter, and produce the new leaves – and sometimes blossom – in the spring.

When predicting his death and resurrection, Jesus used a similar image of transformation. He described a seed, which appeared to be dead, because seeds are often so dry and shrivelled up, but which contained within it the germ of new life. He was preparing his disciples for the ultimate miracle of transformation, when his physical body would be transformed into a spiritual or resurrection body. And before anyone dismisses this as just a myth, don't forget the following:

- first, that Jesus' physical body was never found, despite the fact that many people, especially those who did away with him, would have had a very strong interest in finding that body in order to prove that he was well and truly dead;
- second, remember that large numbers of people, according to the Bible, are said to have seen the risen Jesus, in his resurrection body, conversed with him, and even been invited to eat with him, as we heard in today's gospel reading. These people who met the risen Christ included the women at the tomb, and the disciples; according to St Paul he was also seen by more than 500 others.
- third, we cannot escape the fact that something happened to turn the disciples from being frightened, disillusioned, and concerned just for their own safety into people who were prepared to give their lives in the service of the gospel message that Christ was risen, he was risen indeed.

But the other point about the transformation which we see as a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, and as a seed turns into to a living and growing plant, is that truly remarkable things happen all around us in nature. Because biologists can describe and sometimes explain them, we never really question them and indeed we usually take them for granted. So let's not just dismiss out of hand the idea of a spiritual body, which may be as different from our physical body as a butterfly is from a caterpillar, but which nevertheless has continuity with our physical body, and some form of shared identity with it. In today's gospel reading, again, we see Jesus being described in terms which are definitely not those of a ghost, but as a person who has a body whose nature is both similar to our physical bodies but distinct and different from them. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, St Paul described such a body as a spiritual body, as distinct from our earthly bodies.

Of course when the risen Jesus greeted the women at the tomb, and later on the disciples, such considerations would hardly have been uppermost in their minds. They were simply overjoyed to greet him; their despair suddenly turned to new hope, and their sorrow to joy.

Whatever the nature of our own spiritual bodies may eventually be, however, the risen Christ was different, and indeed unique, in that after his resurrection he was able to appear to those he had been close to, to communicate with them, and to reassure them of his continued presence with them. This presence would endure in the years to come, through the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them - because he was no less than the Son of God, the Lord of all Creation.

For those of you who may find it hard to go beyond the idea of Easter as a simply a time of renewal, a festival to celebrate the arrival of spring, of Easter eggs and Easter bunnies, I urge you to remember this. The account of Christ rising from the dead, of his victory over evil and over no less than death itself is a reminder to us all not to lose hope, in the ups and downs of life, whatever may have happened to us in the past. Time is a great healer of wounds, so be patient, and hold on, if you have been badly hurt by something or someone. By truly forgiving others, just as Christ forgave his persecutors on the cross, we can discover deep inner peace and newness of life. And finally, by rising from the dead, Christ has shown that even death itself is not to be feared: for in doing so he has atoned for our sins, reconciled humanity to God, and opened the kingdom of heaven to all those believe and trust in him, and those who follow his way of mercy, compassion and love. Amen.