

I once had someone say to me 'I don't come to your church at Easter anymore. Because every time I do you say the same thing!'

I tried to put myself in their shoes. I asked the question whether I have stopped taking part in events, or activities, or habits because it just seems like the same thing over and over again.

I surprised myself. I thought how often I will watch my favourite movie. Again. How often I return to the same holiday destination. Again. How much I enjoy a Haigh's block of Dairy Milk chocolate. Again. How often I will buy the same brand of jeans. Again. How often I enjoy catching up with good friends. Again.

Yet I have sympathy with my friend's view. Perhaps you're wondering the same as you come to church today, or join us on line.

But I think I discovered my friend's issue. When they came to church, they couldn't observe the difference between religion and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Much like the people we just read about in the city of Athens.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ changes everything. It changes the way we think about God. It changes the way we think about ourselves. It changes the way we think about the future.

If your experience of the church is one you've walked away from, my prayer is that a living encounter with the resurrected Jesus might be that which brings you back. Three steps to make Easter real and life-changing: Related. Repentant. Resurrected.

Related (v 29) | God's Offspring

Step 1. Recognise you're related. Acts 17:29:

“Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.”

The words for *human design* and *skill* in that verse literally translate *sculpt*, and *sentiment*. Religion, according to Paul the preacher, is the gods we *make with our hands* and *construct in our minds*. The *physical* and *philosophical* idols we create in place of God.

The bible encourages the seeking of understanding and rational thought. But like all God-given human gifts, they can become idolatrous and take his place.

V 23 of Acts 17:

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

Feels like the first century equivalent of atheism.

But Paul doesn't condemn his audience. He graciously explains God is neither a construct of *your hands or your head*. Remarkably, according to v 29, you are his offspring.

We are made in his image. Created to relate. With him above all. And with each other.

In religion we create our own gods. In the resurrection we encounter the God who created us. Living. Loving. Indeed, he is not far from any of us.

Recognise you're related. But realise that when you're encountering the creator we must come to him on his terms.

Repentant (v 30) | God calls all people

Paul explains how a relationship with the resurrected Lord Jesus is possible. By repentance. V 30:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Repentance is the means by which we move beyond the self-searching, self-seeking, self-supporting efforts of religion. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but in the light of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ he will no longer do so.

Like my friend I spoke of earlier, I have to profess knowing the reality of boredom with church. On the one hand I had faithful and committed parents who raised me in the Christian faith. I must always acknowledge their grace and kindness and their firm trust in the resurrected Jesus.

My problem was resistance. To repentance. To turning around. To realising God wasn't seeking religion but relationship.

I now realise I just didn't want the change required. I think the greatest idol I have constructed, and I think I am still having to deal with it, is self-sufficiency. That's a tough idol to stop worshipping. I was worshipping it at 16 and it still lurks decades later.

The message of Easter is that the living God, the creator of the world and its inhabitants, is the only one who does not need anything nor anyone, yet reaches out to offer new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Resurrected (v 31) | God sets a Day

Realise you're related. Turn and repent. And lastly, encounter the resurrected Lord.

V 31:

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

The Lord of Heaven and Earth isn't just chipping away at the edges. He's not trying to achieve some self-improvement or increase your moral mileage.

I get that many people have left the church because they've just thought it failed to make any real difference to their lives. If that's your experience then I apologise that you didn't see more of the life changing and life shaping reality of the resurrected Jesus in his people. Including the leaders.

Because God knows you should have. If we spent more time focusing on the implications of his resurrection and return then perhaps we wouldn't be carrying the painful reputation and religious baggage that masks the power of the resurrection.

Listen to the power of Easter in Romans 6:5:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

United. What brings God's people together is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? The knowledge of sins forgiven. Guilt removed. Death conquered. Life restored. Relationships growing. Barriers broken down. Servanthood understood. Companionship deepened. Generosity abounding.

My prayer is that you would find church unmissable and unforgettable. That doesn't come from entertainment. It doesn't come from ritual. It comes from having your heart and soul transformed by the one who died for you and rose again to deliver an unbreakable bond of friendship and companionship that lasts beyond this world.

If your disappointment with the church is in its behaviour God has set a day when he's going to put things right. All injustice brought to account, and the church will not be excluded. The resurrected Lord Jesus will appear to make certain of that.

While we want to blame God when things don't go our way his plan is to call to account all that is unjust in this world, including our own hearts towards God. Our own feeble attempts to live like we are God.

Humanly speaking, history may be repeating itself. Like my friend's view of church.

But there is an end point. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead tells us life is not about self-determination. Or fate. Or luck. Or random.

The seeking of pleasure or the avoidance of pain is too shallow an expectation for what God has promised us when we encounter the resurrected Lord Jesus. He lived the good life and it ended in crucifixion. But in his resurrection we have witnessed what God has in store for those who love him.

The path Jesus takes from the suffering of the cross, to the transformation of the resurrection, to his return to heaven, is the path promised to all who repent and receive the promised gift of forgiveness and release from condemnation.

We may all be Offspring. When we encounter the risen Lord Jesus we discover the God who was not far from us become one of us. He took on our humanity and transformed it and took it with him into heaven until the Day that has been set.

In 2018 a Dutchman launched legal proceedings in the Netherlands to change his date of birth. To boost his dating prospects. Emile Ratelband, still aged 69, wanted to change his birth date by 20 years to avoid what he called discrimination.

Mr Ratelband even described himself as a "young god" and maintained he had the body of a 40-something and younger age was part of his identity.

The Dutch court disagreed. Rights in law are based on a person's age. Changing it would compromise those rights.

It seems you can't change your age. Nor the date when the resurrected Jesus returns to call us all to account. Will his return be a problem for you?

My friend was right. The Easter message remains the same because the offer of eternal life remains the same.

Is God unknown to you? Perhaps it feels like you've drifted apart? Remember it won't be religion that has the power to change that.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.