

HIW 16.04.2017 (Easter Sunday)

Anthony Mellor-Stapelberg

Easter removes the barrier between God and man

The Gospel according to Mark, Ch. 16, vv. 2-4

²...they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

“The Lord is Risen” – “He is risen indeed”; and I wish you all the joy of Easter in the light of his glorious resurrection.

Last November my wife and I, as well as Michael and Jane Klatt, joined a small group under the leadership of Pastor Kurt Schmidt on a visit to Ethiopia. Many of you know Kurt Schmidt; he was one of the initiators of Hannover International Worship, and I am very pleased that he is here with us this morning – hello Kurt! Having at the time already agreed to preach here at Easter, I was asking myself rather desperately what on earth I could find to say on Easter Sunday of all days: but the Ethiopia visit gave me an idea which I will do my best to put over to you – after a rather long introduction which may get you wondering what it all has to do with Easter, before I come to the point.

I wonder how much you know about “the Ark of the Covenant” – in German “die Bundeslade”. In both languages, the name is not exactly enlightening in itself. I suspect that many people in Germany, asked what they know about the “Bundeslade”, would look blank and ask in return if it has anything to do with the Bundesliga; while in England, if you mentioned the Ark of the Covenant, many people would assume you meant Noah’s Ark. That is at least another use of the same word: “ark” is an old word, no longer used in other contexts, for a wooden storage box or chest. Noah’s Ark was a very big wooden box that floated. The Ark of the Covenant was also a wooden box, but much smaller – about 110 cm long and 70 cm wide and high – and completely overlaid with gold, inside and out [Ex.25,10-11]. According to the Book of Exodus [Ex.25,10-16], God commanded Moses to have this box made to contain the stone tablets that the Ten Commandments were inscribed on [Deut.5,22]. On top of it there was a cover with a figure of a Cherubim at each end; the space between them, known

as the “Mercy Seat”, was the place where God met with his people [Ex.25,17-22]. God also commanded Moses to create a structure for the Ark of the Covenant to be kept in: a structure known in English as the Tabernacle, or in German as the “Stiftshütte” [Ex.26]. Its interior was divided into two sections: an outer one, the Holy Place, and an inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place or “Holy of Holies”, in which the Ark was to be placed [Ex.26,33-34]. The Tabernacle was a portable tent structure, so that the Israelites could take it with them on their wanderings as a visible sign of the presence of their God in their midst and of their covenant with Him. They even took it with them when they went into battle, so that on one occasion it got captured by the Philistines [1Sam.4,11]. King David had the Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem [2Sam.6,12-15], and the Temple that King Solomon built there was intended as a permanent resting place for it. The design of the Temple largely replicated that of the Tabernacle, also with an inner “Holy of Holies” where the Ark was placed [1Kgs 8,6-9]. This Holy of Holies was regarded as being the place where God was directly present, at times even perceptible as a bright aura or as a cloud of smoke [1Kgs 8,10-11]. The only person allowed to enter into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies was the High Priest, and he did so only once a year [Heb.9,7], to present the sacrifice on behalf of the people on the most solemn day of the Jewish year, the Day of Atonement.

But once the Ark of the Covenant had been deposited in the Temple by King Solomon, the Bible tells us practically nothing about what became of it. The 2nd Book of the Kings records that when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the Temple, the royal palace and the city were destroyed by fire [2Kgs 25,9], and there is a detailed list of the gold, silver and bronze objects from the Temple that were carried away to Babylon [2Kgs 25,13-17]. But of the fate of the Ark of the Covenant there is no word. When the Temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, the Holy of Holies appears to have remained empty.

What became of it? Where, perhaps, is it now? The Steven Spielberg adventure film “Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark” may suggest an

answer to that question, but it should be clear to everyone who sees the film that its answer is pure fantasy and not to be taken seriously.

But if you want an answer that is given in complete seriousness, you must do what we did: go to Ethiopia. We can report that every Ethiopian who has the least connection with the ancient Coptic Orthodox church knows precisely where the Ark of the Covenant is. They will tell you that the Queen of Sheba, or Saba, who visited King Solomon in the 10th century before Christ because of the stories she had heard of his wisdom, his wealth and his splendour, was in fact Queen of a Sabaeen kingdom in what is now Ethiopia. That she and King Solomon became lovers, and that on her return to Ethiopia she bore a son, the later King Menelik I. That Menelik, when he had grown up, went to Jerusalem to visit his father Solomon, and stole – no, sorry: his companions came into possession of – the Ark of the Covenant and took it back to Ethiopia, where it remains to this day in the ancient capital, Aksum, in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion. The Ethiopians believe it was God’s will that the Ark should be transferred to their land, that it “came voluntarily”, as it were, otherwise it would have been impossible to remove it from Jerusalem; that it did so because Israel had failed to keep the Covenant with God; and that the transfer of the Ark meant that Aksum had replaced Jerusalem as the spiritual centre of the world, the dwelling-place of God.

So: did we see it when we were in Ethiopia? No, we didn’t. No tourist ever sees it. Indeed, no-one ever sees it, except for one monk whose appointed task it is to take care of it: he is appointed to this task on the death of his predecessor, and it remains his for the rest of his life. And although every Orthodox church in Ethiopia possesses, indeed is required to possess, a replica of the Ark, or whatever it is that is kept in Aksum, no-one ever sees these either, as far as I can make out: not only are they kept in the “Holy of Holies” of the respective churches, but they are concealed under elaborate, richly embroidered wrappings.

Yes indeed: like the ancient Jewish temple, the churches of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church even today have an inner sanctuary, a “Holy of Holies”, which

only priests are allowed to enter. This is a very foreign concept for us Protestants. In earlier years I did not know there were Christian churches where such a separation existed. The idea goes back to a concept of God's holiness as being such that it is dangerous for unholy humans to approach it. In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant has to be mobile; but only the Levites, the priestly class, are allowed to carry it, and they do so using long poles [Ex.25,13-15] clearly intended to ensure that nobody accidentally touches the Ark itself. To do so is fatal. There are two places in the Old Testament where this is described. The first is when the captured Ark is returned to Israel by the Philistines. The inhabitants of a village on the border cannot not restrain their curiosity and look to see what is inside it: seventy of them die [1Sam.6,19]. And when King David had the Ark brought to Jerusalem, carried on an ox-cart instead of using the poles in the proper way, the oxen stumbled, and a man accompanying the Ark put out his hand and touched it, apparently to steady it: he died on the spot [2Sam.6,6-7].

And the people of Ethiopia believe not only that this same Ark of the Covenant is preserved in their country, but also that it has lost none of its destructive power towards those who do not wholly respect its sanctity. The journalist Philipp Hedemann, in his entertaining and precisely observed account of his travels through Ethiopia in the years 2010-13, entitled "Der Mann, der den Tod auslacht", tells how the assistant to the Keeper of the Ark in Aksum explained to him why it had to be concealed: "We are protecting you against the Ark, not the Ark against you." The Ark, he said, shines with seven times the power of the sun. Anyone who looked at it would immediately be blinded and paralysed and would then die. Only the appointed Keeper of the Ark is immune against its power. Humankind may be God's creation and made in His image; but it is fallen and sinful, and the holiness of God will not abide the sinfulness of man.

We have of course a simple word to describe prohibitions regarding things that are considered so sacred as to be potentially deadly to those who approach

them unworthily: they are taboo. I remember once hearing of a man who, entering a church on a South Pacific island, was shocked to see the words “Tabu, Tabu, Tabu” written on the front of the altar. This contradicted his Protestant conception of the relationship between God and his people: and when a local person explained to him: “That is ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ in our language,” he found himself having to reconsider his attitudes towards the holiness of God and various features of liturgical practice and behaviour in church generally.

And so, in Ethiopian churches, we repeatedly found ourselves standing in front of the curtains closing off the Holy of Holies, which we were forbidden to pass through. And as we stood there – and here at last I come to the core of the message I want to put over this morning – I repeatedly found myself thinking of a verse, not from the Easter Gospel, but from that for Good Friday: at the moment when Jesus died on the Cross, we are told, “the curtain of the Temple” – or “the veil of the Temple”, to give the more traditional translation – “was torn in two from top to bottom” [Mt.27,51; Mk.15,38; Lk.23,45].

From very early on, for example in the Letter to the Hebrews, this happening is interpreted as showing that through the death of Jesus, that barrier separating humankind from God has been removed [Heb.9,11-12 & 10,19-20]. God’s holiness is no longer remote from humankind; a matter for awe perhaps, but not for fear, not a threat of destruction. The view into the inner sanctuary is opened. This is why I wanted to mention that “the curtain” is more traditionally known as “the veil”: because whereas a curtain may have many uses, the purpose of a veil is precisely to conceal what is behind it – usually a person or a person’s face – from the eyes of those who are considered not to have the right to see it. But this veil was torn in two, because God was no longer to be shielded from humankind, or humankind from God.

Did you notice, in the Epistle reading today, how Paul says that both death and the resurrection of the dead came about? “Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” [1Cor.15,21-22]. Christ is here unambiguously

regarded as being human. It has been said that in the debates and disputes about the nature of Christ in the early Church, it was more difficult to persuade converts that Christ was a man than to persuade them that he was God. But it is precisely the God who has become man in Jesus who is no longer untouchable. We know how Jesus came to people, how he met them – in the synagogues and the temple, certainly, but also on the shores of the lake, in the streets of the towns, in the fields and on the hillsides. And then God in the man Jesus allowed humankind to take him prisoner, to mock him, humiliate him, wound him, and submit him to torture and a cruel death. He took our humanity upon himself, with all its pains and trials, “even unto death, yes, the death of the Cross” [Phil. 2,8]. And then in the power of God that man rose from the dead, overcoming death and sin, and leading us through the torn veil into the divine presence itself.

And if it is God incarnate in the man Jesus who removes the separation between the divine and the human, then we can associate this with any of the great festivals that celebrate the person of Christ. As my thoughts revolved round the Good Friday event of the veil of the temple being torn, elements associated with Christmas and Easter came into my mind as well. My favourite German Christmas carol contains the verse:

“Heut’ schließt er wieder auf die Tür zum schönen Paradeis;
der Cherub steht nicht mehr dafür: Gott sei Lob, Ehr' und Preis.”

God’s coming into the world in a human being reopens the gates of Paradise, of the Garden of Eden, seen as the dwelling place of God: there is no longer the barrier of the flaming sword to separate us from him.

And Easter – yes, I have got to Easter at last! – provides us with the picture of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, still frightened and overwhelmed by the events of two days before, coming to the tomb in the early morning and asking each other anxiously, “Who will roll the stone away?” They do not yet know that the curtain of the temple has been torn in two; they do not know, they find out only now, that their anxiety is groundless, because the stone has been rolled away; another, final barrier between God and human-

kind has been removed. Once when I was thumbing through a book in a small library at the back of a church, I came, as if by chance, upon a sentence that has stayed with me ever since: “The stone was not rolled away to let Jesus out, but to let the disciples in.” The disciples – first the women, then, according to the other Gospels [Lk.24,12; Jn.20,3-8], some of the Apostles – were able to go into the tomb and see that there was no dead body lying there.

I don't intend to contradict what Gretchen said in her introduction to this service: that the true resurrection is to be found not in the *absence* of Christ's body from the tomb; but in his living *presence* in the world, with his disciples and with us today. But as Gretchen also said, nobody actually saw him at that moment: discovering his absence from the tomb was the first step towards the greater realisation that was still to come.

It is probably useless to attempt to answer the women's question and say who did roll the stone away. Was it “angels in bright raiment”, as we sang in our opening hymn? Only in Matthew's Gospel [Matt.28,2] are we told that it was an angel that did it, in full view of the terrified guards, and that the same angel proclaimed the resurrection to the women, still, apparently, with the guards looking on. I find this rather difficult to visualise, or indeed to visualise any hand, human or angelic, actually rolling the stone. But I can see that last barrier being somehow removed, and not by any purely human agency, but by the grace of God and by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ. In the words of the article “Bundeslade” in my wife's Dictionary of the Bible, “For 800 years the Ark of the Covenant was the visible sign of the LORD's presence for His people; after another 600 years the LORD Himself came to dwell on earth and became the fulfilment of the Covenant. Christ is the realisation of what the Ark was a symbol of in the Old Testament: the presence of the Living, Holy, Just and Merciful God.”

Do I, then, feel so close to God, feel that there is nothing separating me from Him? Do you? These are questions I can hardly get into answering this morning. Every Christian would no doubt say that there are times when he or she feels closer, times when he or she feels further away. We would probably

also all agree that there are some of our fellow Christians who at least appear to us to be much closer to Him than we feel ourselves to be, and whom we can regard as models of what “being close to God” looks like. What I am sure of is that there is nothing that **prevents** us from being close to Him, if we are prepared to commit ourselves to Him, and to seek Him in the Bible, in prayer, in fellowship and in love and mercy towards others. “The Lord is risen!” The barriers are down; the stone is rolled away: and in the words of our next hymn:

“Thou within the veil hast entered, robed in flesh, our great High Priest”.
Alleluya, sing to Jesus. Amen.