



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Easter Day (31<sup>st</sup> March) 2024

If we strip out the Christian claims of Jesus' Resurrection, today's observance alludes to a remarkable phenomenon of human history: the rise of a tiny grouping from a backwater in the world to a prominence which would, for maybe a thousand years, be a major player in the affairs of Europe and for some of that time much of the Near and Middle East as well.

The initial circumstances were not auspicious. By the time that Jesus of Nazareth, the Man at the centre of the association, was executed, the group around Him was already in severe decline and even the closest circle of His followers was fracturing. After His Crucifixion these Apostles, as we call them, had scattered. Yet, someone related a story that He had risen from the dead and whether or not that was true, a society of those devoted to His memory was called to life.

Later stages of the rise of what would come to be called Christianity are not difficult to understand: from the beginning of the fourth century, a succession of potentates adopted the religious movement. However, between those early days and Constantine's embrace of the Church there was a remarkable expansion of Christian practice and infrastructure such as recommended itself to him: and all that against a background of periodic persecution and the equally adverse influence of being unfashionable.

The sequence of pacts, which the Church entered with a sequence of kings and emperors, in the way of these things, dangled worldly prizes in front of the Christian institutions, but, in fact, sowed the seeds of her ultimate enfeeblement in more recent generations.

Yet, for all decline in the Church's fortunes through much of the last century or maybe more, her influence is far from finished. Many of the values articulated in the Gospel by Jesus still underlie prevailing views of morality in Europe and other parts of the world strongly influenced by her heritage.

However, of course, these values have been separated from their Source in many circles, now considered somehow to be sown into the fabric of creation: the US Declaration of Independence asserted that they are self-evident; but as we look around the world today, we see a decreasing constituency of people who consider them cogent, let alone self-evident. Many of them would argue that ours is just one way amongst many of organising society and that each polity can make its own choice.

Those who sense a metaphysical origin and authority to these values might care to reflect on whether that can really be explained simply by the processes of cosmic happenstance. In so doing, they could return to the remarkable ascendancy of Christianity after Christ's Crucifixion and wonder whether there was, after all, something to the story of His Resurrection, which still calls to them, not through the medium of the earthly institution of the Church, but through what they consider the compelling authority of His teaching.

What we celebrate here today is the crucial piece in the chain of events, which embedded the teaching of Christ in human consciousness and without it we would be none the wiser today.