

HOW TO SPEAK IN AN UNDERSTANDABLE WAY ABOUT THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

by Ernesto Borghi

In the last few days we have had the opportunity to read and listen to many assertions on the theme of "resurrection". Without prejudice to the freedom of anyone to express themselves as they see fit, all this makes it ever more urgent that we intensify a basic effort to examine all the over-used phrases and even "slogans" on issues essential to the Christian faith such as, precisely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and of human beings, which in ecclesial preaching and catechesis (but also in "lay" publications) are still heard today.

In my opinion it is indispensable that phrases such as, for example, "The risen Jesus Christ has conquered death", "One must be open to the Holy Spirit", "The resurrection is a fact, not a fable" should be explained and not only asserted. In fact, it is really essential to avoid that affirmations, formally irreproachable at the theological level, remain incomprehensible to the majority of the population also because they are products of cultural categories that for some time are no longer those commonly used, even if they ever once were. And trying to give these explanations, first of all at a popular level, is not necessarily difficult.

For the moment, I will limit myself to proposing the following summary observations.

From the biblical texts

- The centrality of the resurrection of Jesus for Christian origins is quite evident: to understand this, it is enough to read across the entire New Testament and various apocryphal texts. On the other hand, the Gospel versions according to Mark (chap. 16), Matthew (chap. 28), Luke (chap. 24) and John (chap. 20-21) as well as the first letter to the Corinthians (chap. 15) do not recount the event of the resurrection, but speak of the appearances of the Risen One and their effects on the psychology and life of the women and men involved.

- It is precisely the Gospel narratives that present interesting peculiarities with respect to both the accounts of Jesus' life up to his burial and to many other New Testament texts:

- there are no references to earlier Hebrew Scriptures, which are elsewhere numerous particularly in the gospels according to Matthew and Luke;

- there is absolutely no mention of the resurrection of other human beings after Jesus and of their presence with him in a "post mortem" existence, but essentially of their task of announcing the definitive lordship of the Risen One and reaffirming the ethical values he preached and practised in his life;

- the risen Jesus is never presented as a radiant and luminous celestial being. The encounters with him have none of the characteristics of the celestial or divine visions present in so many ancient literary works;

- there is a constant presence of women - generally considered, especially in the courts, as unreliable - precisely as the first witnesses of the announcement of the Resurrection and as interlocutors of the Risen One (Mary of Magdala in particular). The story that the evangelists tell is anterior to Paul and goes back to the earliest period, before anyone could even think that it would be good to tell something about Jesus rising from the dead, and 'what could be more useful for apologetic purposes?' It is much, much easier to assume that the women were there from the beginning, just as, three days earlier, they had been there at the end.

Summing up, it is legitimate to affirm that the real Jesus can be reached, at the present stage of studies and historical research, in a considerably fragmentary form. On the other hand, it is equally indisputable, sources in hand, that faith in the God of Jesus Christ crucified and risen was the fundamental motive that led to the drafting of the New Testament writings. Without taking this

fact into account, it is impossible to grasp much, perhaps very much, of what happened in the first decades following the death of the Nazarene. Especially, given

- the bleak picture of the "reactions" of the Twelve to the capture of Jesus,
- the originally secondary role of some of the Eleven at the apparitions of the Risen One and the primary role of witnesses traditionally considered unreliable such as women. Who would have been interested in telling about the resurrection of the Master, given the facts which seem disreputable for the entourage of Jesus, if it had not been effective?

Certainly: this is an argument that is paradoxical, perhaps at first glance unbelievable, especially for those who have been told for centuries about the resurrection and the preceding events in the life of the Nazarene as if the canonical Gospel versions had been complete chronicles and as if those who spoke about them had been eyewitnesses to all these events...

A synthesis for the culture of today and tomorrow

In the face of all that Mark-Matthew-Luke-John narrate about Jesus, from the beginning of his life until his farewell to his disciples after the resurrection (cf. Lk 24:36-53; Mt 28:16-20), one fact remains unchanging: one is absolutely free to trust or not to trust that the Nazarene was resurrected and that the love witnessed by him, as the biblical texts narrate, is in any case more important than death.

The Gospel versions, but also the other New Testament books, beginning with the Pauline letters, are not concerned with forcing belief. They propose, exhort, pray, and invite us to reflect on the radical truth of this love - the crucified and risen one - for the life of all. They do not give proofs of a "positivistic" nature, but offer an existential perspective, which concerns first of all the way in which one leads one's life "here" and "now".

In addition to the experience of the death on the cross, let us consider, for various scientific studies have been pointing in this direction for some time now, without prejudice to the mediation of the evangelists, some parabolic accounts, certain exorcisms and healings, the dictation of the Lord's Prayer and the Last Supper. Wouldn't all of this be useful enough to ground the continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, without prejudice to the fundamental relevance of the belief that the Nazarene was resurrected?

Then to say that "the risen Jesus Christ has conquered death" means not that death has disappeared, but that the idea that everything ended with death has been overcome, beginning with the relationships of affection between people. "Opening oneself to the Holy Spirit" (also starting from the episode of Pentecost - cf. Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11) does not mean thinking of God's miraculous entrances into human life, but of the human choice to try to live with others according to the logic of the Spirit, that is, according to a love in the image and likeness of that manifested by the Nazarene for human beings.

And the explanatory discourse must be able to continue on a particularly rich series of topics, in order to contribute to making culture, in a serious and comprehensible way, regarding the foundations of the Christian faith. It is necessary to do this in a non-traditionalistic way (the risk, in this regard, is constant...), thinking in particular of today's young generations and of all those who consider it important to confront, in full freedom of conscience, with intelligence and passion, their trust in the love of the God of Jesus Christ.

To deepen the theme of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

- B. Seboüé, *The Resurrection and the Life*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1996;
- D. Marguerat, *Résurrection. Une histoire de vie*, Éditions du Moulin, Genève 2001;
- N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection*, tr. it., Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2003;
- B. Maggioni, *I racconti evangelici della risurrezione*, Cittadella, Assisi (PG) 2008;
- J. M. Castillo, *L'humanización de Dios*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid 2010;
- G. Rossé, *La risurrezione di Gesù*, tr. it., EDB, Bologna 2016;
- P. Ricca, *Dell'aldilà e dall'aldilà. Che cosa accade quando si muore?*, Claudiana, Torino 2018.

To deepen the foundations of the Christian faith

The youtube channel "Associazione Biblica della Svizzera Italiana" offers, under the headings "Scoprire cose nuove e cose antiche" and "Per conoscere i sacramenti cristiani", a series of reflections useful in the formative perspective proposed in this article. Anyone can also take advantage of these formative opportunities and make their existence known to all those who are interested and can be interested.