

Sermon Easter Day 2005....

In the Hollywood movies about the life of Jesus – *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *King of Kings* and so on, the resurrection bit always reminds me of something out of Patience Strong – or perhaps out of that slushy novel *The Maid of Buttermere* by the well-known literary giant Melvyn Bragg. I'm afraid I once upset Melvyn by describing him as the Barbara Cartland of the Lakeland Fells. You know the sort of slush I mean: Jesus in his white frock stands by the Sea of Galilee and his praises resound to the intonation of the Milwaukee High School Girls' Choir.

It wasn't like that at the first Easter. Christ actually conquered death. Now Algernon Charles Swinburne says of this victory:

Thou hast conquered O pale Galilean, and the world has grown grey from thy breath

But our Christ was not pale. And he does not make us grey. For the Christ who rose on Easter Day was no rose-tinted spectre. He was no clapped out modern theologian's mere metaphor for the disciples' so called *new sense of life*. In fact the disciples' new sense of life was *because* Christ was truly risen.

And the Christ who rose was the Christ who had healed the sick and cured the blind. The risen Christ was the Christ who stilled the waves of the sea and stood over a grave calling to Lazarus to come out. This is our Christ who turned water into wine. Who behaved insubordinately to his parents when he was twelve. Our Christ who cursed the fig tree and cast out devils. This risen Christ was still the same man who called the Pharisees whited sepulchres and who slung the racketeers out of the temple.

This is the risen Christ who appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden. Now that seedy little verse from the seedy little Algernon Charles Swinburne is set in a garden *The Garden of Proserpine* – that is the garden of death. Our Christ had been in the garden of death – Gethsemane – and sweat blood there. And today our Christ rises in a garden of life. Algernon Charles used to like to be whipped lightly. Our Christ was whipped to within an inch of his life. The resurrection shows violently that the whole sentimental romanticism of such as Swinburne and the gooey lives of Jesus whether by Ernst Renan or in the movies is just worthless. And worse than worthless, it is decadent and perverse.

The risen Christ is a physical, muscular Christ and he has things for us to do. We are commanded to preach the gospel to every creature and *every one that believeth shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned*. The commandment given by the risen Christ first to Mary Magdalene and to the twelve is to proclaim the truth. And this is what we are here for today: to proclaim the truth. Our Lord did not add, *But tone it down a bit in case what you say is offensive to others in a multicultural society*. He said proclaim the truth because your very life depends upon it. Those who believe the truth will be saved and those who don't believe it will be damned. And I'm not making this up...

This is where we start from. Where the disciples started from. We start from a world of unbelief - that is a world which rejects the truth and prefers lies. There were of

course the conspicuous tyrannies of unbelief with their genocides, holocausts and mass slaughters of their own people. Hitler's murder of 6 million. Stalin's 40 million. Millions more by Mau Tse Tung and Pol Pot. And with those gentlemen their atheism was not a mere accident, as it were a casual reverie while they were ordering the gas chambers while discussing the dialectic and appointing the gulag or the killing fields. They did their murders in the name of atheism. And there are still fellow travellers in the west who have not apologised for their support for these evil men.

But there is also the poisonous climate of unbelief in the institutions of our own country today. It is unbelief and rejection of God's law which rips 190,000 unborn children untimely from the womb every year – chiefly as a form of contraception. Unbelief and scorn for God is there in the demoralising of human love by the politically-correct demands that all forms of sexual coupling be regarded as equal. It is atheistic wolves in liberal sheep's clothing which has abolished Christian teaching in our schools.

This is the same unbelief and intellectual suicide which declares that all opinions – however irrational or ill-informed – are equally valid. This amounts simply to a denial that there is such a thing as truth. What you might call *cool, ironic...* In fact it is Pontius Pilate's attitude to the truth. He, you remember, asked dreadfully, *What is truth?* While all the time the Truth was standing before him ready to be killed.

But unbelief is not a mere matter of the mind and intellect. Unbelief does not generally mean that someone has examined the doctrines of the faith and found them wanting. Unbelief is above all a *practice*. Whatever people *say* they believe, they actually run their lives as if there were no God. You have only to read the features pages of the so called *quality* newspapers, or the main TV channels, and their obsession with diets and goodies and fashion and every form of self-indulgence and self-pampering. Newspapers for those described by Thomas Carlyle as *Mayfair clothes-horses and patent digesters*.

Or walk into the middle of any town or city and observe the slouching, chewing, shopping mob disgorging its food wrappers as it goes, plugged in to its barbaric music or chattering its emptiness into the mobile phone. Even the old pagan societies had more mind about them than this. For the ancient Greeks the city square was sacred space. Now it is the filth left behind by a vacuous consumerism.

It is the vocation of the church to speak against this unbelief and to bring redemption. It is the job of the church to clean up the mess. Instead we find unbelief at the heart of the church itself. The *King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* have been discarded by those who promised to uphold them. When they are asked, many of the clergy, including the bishops, admit they disbelieve in fundamental articles of the faith such as the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth. The church has simply accepted the secularist agenda. It has abandoned Heilige Geist for Zeitgeist and follows the spirit of the age, the fashions of the times – only like some prince consort, always one dutiful step behind.

This has all happened before. G.K. Chesterton lists five historical occasions when it looked as if the church would die and belief would no longer be found on earth. Yet Jesus was faithful to his promise that the gates of hell would not prevail. All I can say

is that, as we look at the world this morning, the gates of hell are having another damn good try. The old opposition of Left and Right was always only a smokescreen. The real opposition is between right and wrong, between belief and unbelief.

You may be assured that Christ will save the church again. But he will not do this without our help. He *cannot* do it without our co-operation, for we are the Body of Christ in the world. I will not stand here in this parish, in this great City, in my beloved country and see unbelief triumph. I *will* stand for the faith of Christ and in his resurrection. But I cannot stand alone. I need you to stand with me: to stand up and be counted – counted that is among the remnant who have not caved in to the forces of unbelief and godlessness.

It will not be nice. It will not be polite. It will be messy. And it will cost. But at this time in our history He is come not to bring peace but a sword. We stand for nothing less than the restoration of the Christian faith to our native land. And this is the commandment of the Risen Christ that we *preach the gospel to every creature and every one that believeth shall be saved but he that believeth not shall be damned.*