

Sermon, The Ascension 2006...

The gospel story of Our Lord's Ascension into heaven is the last of the Resurrection appearances. We should be sure we understand what we are talking about here. The Resurrection of Christ is not about a dead body getting up and walking about.

Anastasia is a pretty name and means *standing up again after you're dead*. But that is not exactly what happened. For once the old sceptical Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, was right: the Resurrection was not *a conjuring trick with bones*. So what was it then?

It was an appearance of the transcendent Body of Christ as he is in heaven. If you like, it was a breaking through of heaven into the world. As St Paul puts it, *Christ is the first fruits of them that slept*. And so we correctly say that the Christ who appeared to the disciples was the glorified Christ, the heavenly Christ over whom death has no dominion. And the good news is that we are all going to be like him. As St Paul says again, *As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*. So the old Negro spiritual has it just right: we are all *bound for glory*.

But this is really wishful-thinking, isn't it – a fairy tale to encourage people to be good, to uphold what are sometimes called Christian principles? Well, if the Resurrection is not true, then Christian principles count for nothing. Once again St Paul saw this clearly, *If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain*. So there's no use in coming to church out of decency and good form, to ornament your good manners with a little promenade. If you don't believe the Resurrection, there's no point coming to church at all.

The prevailing modern notion is that the people of biblical times were primitive and so they believed daft things such as the Miracles and the Resurrection. The prevailing view goes on to say that we modern scientific people now know better: the Resurrection is a sort of parable, fable or myth useful for hanging your morality on, but not actually true. That is the prevailing modern notion and it is entirely wrong. I will say it until I am blue in the face: something that is not true is no basis for anything. And if you won't take it from me, take it from St Paul: *If Christ be not raised your faith is in vain*.

Let me give you another example of the prevailing modern notion and explain just why it is wrong. One of the most famous books of social anthropology was written in 1890 by Sir James Frazer and it is called *The Golden Bough*. Frazer made a study of primitive peoples and their rituals. He believed some strange things about primitive people: for example, he thought that they performed rain dances to make it rain.

This book appealed greatly to the British intelligentsia – largely I think because it helped them feel superior to their ancestors. And the smug progressive intelligentsia largely ignored one great and subtle thinker's complete destruction of the reasoning in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein remarked, *Of course the primitive man did not think that his dancing made it rain. That would be a kind of science, cause and effect. Actually the primitive man was not as stupid as Frazer. He understood perfectly well that it rained eventually whether he did the rain dance or not*.

Wittgenstein goes on: *The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.*

He adds: *What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! He cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness!*

It is not the ancients who were stupid: it is the modern progressives and their superior attitude, ignorance and arrogance who are stupid. There is no reason to doubt the Resurrection of Christ: it is simply necessary to drop your prejudice against believing it. As Chesterton remarked

The progressive does not disbelieve in the Resurrection because his liberal Christianity allows him to doubt it. He disbelieves in it because his very strict materialism does not allow him to believe it

And now materialism has been discredited by science itself in quantum mechanics.

The biblical writers were not ignorant, primitive people lost in their stupidity until modern man came along to enlighten them. Isn't it astonishing, when you think about it, to find prejudiced, shallow, pseudo-scientific know-alls and windbags of the 19th, 20th and now 21st centuries presuming to tell St Paul, St Luke and St John that they had got it all wrong about the Resurrection and Ascension?

Let us just consider the case of St Paul, who, as we know, most certainly believed the Resurrection. Do these modern windbags really think he was some sort of primitive ignoramus? St Paul was schooled in Old Testament history and theology and in classical Greek philosophy. If you read St Paul's letters – especially to the Romans and the Corinthians – you will find them to be masterpieces of philosophical reasoning and poetic evocation. St Paul was a philosophical master and a poet of genius. If he were alive today, he would be offered university professorships. And he would certainly turn them down – and carry on sailing the Mediterranean and mending his tents.

If you want to know just what the Resurrection is all about and how it is true, you should read St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter fifteen. First, what does St Paul say to those who think there are no miracles and no Resurrection – but you can still have Christian values and standards? He says this: *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*

Then here come the critics and sceptical windbags. There were plenty of them around in St Paul's day too: *How are the dead raised and with what body do they come?*

Paul answers them as they deserve: *Thou fool! That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die.*

And he goes on to tell us what the Resurrection body is like in verses which are a livid crescendo of sheer affirmation and truth:

All flesh is not the same flesh...there are also celestial bodies and bodies terrestrial...So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body...The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

Do not harbour any doubts. Christ is risen indeed, ascended, glorified.