

Sermon, Easter 2007...

Once again we are enveloped in the familiar sounds and sight of Easter. There are the spring flowers in the City parks, the trees coming into their new green, *Tesco's* special offer on Champagne, and the babble of microphones as bishops and senior clergy turn out to deny the Resurrection. Do you remember the old Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins and his *conjuring trick with bones*? I was a country parson near York back in 1984 when Jenkins was consecrated bishop and the Minster was struck by lightning. There were denials then too. I wrote a piece in *The Guardian* about it, and the Archbishop of York reprimanded me by writing in the paper that, contrary to what Mullen thinks, *God does not send down fire from heaven*. I was so grateful to him, for it provided me with my most disgracefully successful one-liner: *Tell it to Elijah, Archbishop*.

When modern clergymen queue up to deny the resurrection of Our Lord, what do they actually think happened instead? For forty years and more they have been reinterpreting – their word is *demythologising* – the Resurrection to mean not that he rose again, but that the disciples *experienced a surge of new life*. Of course, they leave unanswered the obvious question: *If their Lord and Master remained dead, what did they have to feel lively about?*

There is no intellectual difficulty in believing the Resurrection. As the great Charles Sisson put it: *It is merely a case of removing a prejudice*. And that prejudice is crude materialism – an epistemological dogma long since shown to be false by modern physics. Chesterton explains exactly the real root of scepticism about the Resurrection: *They do not disbelieve it because their Christian liberalism allows them to doubt it, but because their very strict materialism does not allow them to accept it*. The Resurrection is historically attested. Materialism is a discredited prejudice.

After all these years I admit to being rather bored by the tedious sceptical debunking of the Gospel perpetrated by those who are ordained and paid to preach it. Evelyn Waugh has them bang to rights in *Scoop* where he says: *There is a species of person called a "Modern Churchman" who draws the full salary of a beneficed clergyman and need not commit himself to any religious belief*. These debunking modern churchmen are arrogant – and, worse than arrogant, they are vulgar.

But this year a new miasma has ascended from the pile. The nearly-bishop Jeffrey John who, on account of his too public peculiarities, had to settle for being made Dean of St Albans instead. (Oh dear, I feel a limerick coming on. I shall have to go and have a lie down) Anyhow, this Mr John has appeared on the BBC to say not that the Resurrection is a fake but that we've got it all wrong about the Crucifixion as well.

Mr John said that the traditional teaching about Our Lord's Crucifixion is *repulsive* and *insane* – particularly the part which says Christ was sent to earth to die for the forgiveness of our sins. This, says Mr John, *...makes God sound like a psychopath*. But the New Testament does not teach that God sent his Son, as it were, to take the rap for us by doing something that God himself was not willing to do. When Christ suffered, God was suffering. Or as St Paul puts it more elegantly: *God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself*.

You know why Mr John and his school will not accept that Christ died for our sins? It's simply because they don't believe in sin. Sin, for them, is one of those nasty old religious words that the progressive, deodorised modern theologians have got rid of. They do not believe in sin. They believe in self-esteem. But sin is where we start from. We all know this. You don't have to go scanning the newsreels for mass torture and genocide: each one of us knows, after a moment's heart-searching, that we have done things for which we are now sorry and for which we are ashamed; and that we shall do similar things again.

That is all sin is. And it doesn't depend on whether your trousers are up or your trousers are down. Sin is the human condition, our constant frustration and shame. St Paul spells it out for us in words of one syllable: *The thing I would not, that I do; and what I would, I do not*. We all know how that feels. And we want to escape from it, do something about it, do better. But we can't. So we need Christ the Redeemer. The Bible's view of man starts with sin. But - cheer up! - it doesn't end there. We are also capable of being led by the grace of God into sharing the life of Christ. That is Easter.

So then, the disciples did experience a rush of new life - because Jesus lives. And they turned the world upside down. Twelve of them, not counting the best of them - the women. They were prepared to be put to death for the faith. And most of them were. We, the present day successors of the apostles, are not called to be put to death - not yet anyway. But do not be in any doubt: the Christian faith is being relentlessly persecuted in Britain today. We face rampant secularism and institutional atheism.

Three out of four firms refused to put up Christmas decorations last year. The majority of Christmas cards no longer featured the Nativity scene. More shops and stores than ever opened for business on Christmas Day. These are just the outward signs of an increasingly militant secularism, for the fact is that the progressive elite in Britain today detests Christianity and wishes to destroy it. The country is not being destroyed by alien terrorists but our traditional way of life and self-understanding is being undermined by aggressive secularisation.

Chain bookshops marketed the atheist Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* as their *Christmas Book*. Liberal newspapers, and especially the BBC, have established a pattern of debunking and sneering at traditional Christian doctrine. TV and radio documentaries repeatedly dismiss as rubbish Intelligent Design - the truth that the world was created by God.

And once God and intellectual rigour have been discarded, there is bound to follow the collapse of morality. And this is just what has happened. Promiscuity to the extent of casual sexual relationships among any number of people, regardless of their sexual orientation; drinking, shopping and - coming soon - gambling 24/7; vicious hedonism pursuing all that is merely trivial; an infantile and narcissistic cult of celebrities - and all built on a mountain of government and personal debt and an amnesiac culture of designer drugs and oblivion. What used to be a mortal sin is now only a lifestyle choice. Just ask the Dean of St Alban's

It may surprise you to learn that teaching Christianity in state schools is now illegal. It is permitted only to teach *about* religions. Absolute relativism rules OK. All religions must be taught as equal. The only perspective from which you can teach such equality

is atheism. And at the centre of the secular atheistic project is the destruction of the historic basis of our way of life: marriage and the family. Last month legislation was passed in Parliament – without even the veneer that would have been provided by a debate – to decree that any form of human coupling – but why stop at two? - has the same status as marriage.

The answer to this persecution is the same given by the apostles. It is to live the life of the resurrected Christ. To persist in the faith whatever is thrown against us. Our task and vocation is to re-Christianise England. And it starts here. It starts with ourselves. We can no longer take for granted a huge establishment or infrastructure of support. The ruling establishment now is secular and vigorously antichristian.

So what must we do? As your parish priest, I'm not calling you to do anything strange, new or different. I'm calling you to recognise the great peril we are in. To get serious. And then what? Just to say your prayers, to read and hear the Word of God, to devote yourself to the Sacrament. To learn to love God and to draw nearer to him – to live the life of Christ who is risen from the dead.