

Sermon: Easter Day 2008...

There is no reason to seek proofs of Our Lord's resurrection. The proof of the resurrection is the existence of the church, growing for 2000 years, so that today there are more Christians than ever in its whole history. People talk about the decline of the church. It's rubbish. Everywhere you look, the church is growing: Africa – 350 million new Christians in sub-Saharan Africa in the last ten years. Latin America. South America. China. India.

Northern Europe's suicidal infatuation with secularisation is not typical. And even in Northern Europe, in England, where the full faith is taught – not some watered down apology for the faith by trendy bishops and the numbskull Synod – where the full faith is taught, the church is growing. For instance, we have seen a tenfold growth in the church in this parish in as many years.

But, concerning evidence for Our Lord's resurrection, there is one fascinating insight by the new and believing Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright. I'd like to pass it on to you. He points out that all four Gospels say that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. Now in the ancient Middle East the witness of women was not held very highly. In St Paul's Epistles, written years before the Gospels, the witness of the women is not mentioned – a cynic would say, *airbrushed out*. So why did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John put the witness of the women back in again, unless their witness is true?

But, as Samuel Coleridge said, *I am weary of evidences*. The resurrection of Our Lord is not a matter of forensic science. The way to approach it – the way to approach all Christian teaching – is with an informed and devoted imagination. The Gospels are not a circular from the Council Tax Office or the tedium incarnate which we have to put up with in the annual parish returns of the Diocese of London. The Gospels are a whole world. Like what? Well, like a symphony by, let us say, Beethoven. Unless you have the sort of crackpot consciousness that uses great music as wallpaper, when you listen to your recording of Beethoven – say *The Eroica* – you sit down and you sit still; you might even pour yourself a drink: you relax with your ears open and your mind attending.

If you do this right, you seem to lose sight of the furnishings where you're sitting, the window frame, whether the door is open or shut. You enter the world of *The Eroica Symphony* and something happens to your whole being. You are filled with the music. You have entered a particular musical world. And the musical world has entered you. So with the resurrection: don't approach it academically, clinically, forensically, theoretically. Instead, open the Gospels and read the stories. Use your imagination. Let the stories penetrate your mind and heart.

The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre.

You can hear her footsteps in the rhythm of those words. If I were back in Bolton teaching children in Whitecroft School, I would get them to clap the rhythm out and then say the words. Then, all of them, say the words again. Then clapping again. Inside five minutes of this, the whole class would be at the empty tomb with Mary

Magdalene. And I'll tell you what: when we met for our next lesson, the children would say, *Can we do it again, Sir – that clapping thing? It were great!* Because they had entered the world. They were enchanted. Better still, they were transfigured. It's a kind of indoctrination. Good – putting doctrines in is a good thing. It's a sort of brainwashing. Yes – brains should be cleansed.

Behold, two of his disciples went that same day to a village called Emmaus...Abide with us, for it is towards evening and the day is far spent...and their eyes were opened and they knew him.

All in the April evening and the lambs and the spring flowers. And it's set in your imagination in England. And it's the evening on Easter Sunday, after the service. The church candles extinguished. The aromatic blend of ritual and red wine. The church quiet and the ending of another Easter Day. *Abide with us.* And it becomes England in your heart and mind because you're reading from the English Bible. And, if you let them, the rhythms of the English Bible will shape your lives like the English landscape. This is not a theory. Not an argument. Not a balance-sheet. This is a field, a mountain, a river, a chunk of English Gospel. Get your hands full of the Gospel story. Feel it.

But then there *are* the people with the Council Tax minds, brains fit only to fill in the Diocesan returns. They will be doubtful of the resurrection. Oh well, there's a story for them:

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

Do that as well, with Doubting Thomas. Do it with all your imagination and concentration – like listening to the Beethoven – and see where that takes you. You are there in the upper room, face to face with Jesus. He is asking if you trust him.

You notice I am asking you to read the English Bible, the *King James Version*. A good reason England is one of the few secularised, de-Christianised countries on earth is because the Bishops and the clergy have discouraged the reading of the English Bible. St Paul's cathedral gave St Sepulchre's a beautiful lectern copy of the *King James Bible*. The Canon told me they never used it at the cathedral – *only*, he said, *when the Royal Family come: awkward people like that*. A man wrote last week in *The Spectator* that he was due to read a lesson at a memorial service at Westminster Abbey. He asked if he could read it in the real Bible. They said, *No*.

Last week *The Sunday Telegraph* gave away to all its readers a copy of the Passion of Our Lord according to St Mark. A lovely thing to do – except they gave copies of *The New International Version* – what I call *The Bad News Bible*. I got as far as page two where it says the disciples were *reclining* at table as they ate the Last Supper. But it was the institution of the Eucharist not a dissolute party at Nero's palace. *Reclining*. That is the sort of tin-eared literary vandalism which has almost succeeded in removing all traces of religious awareness from the hearts and minds of English people. And note this: the people who chuck out the real Bible and the real Prayer Book – the bishops and the clergy – are the same people who promised to use those books at their Ordination

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou. She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master

And to all of you this morning: Why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? Would you like to find Jesus on this Easter Day? You can and you shall. Here he is our Host at this Banquet. He is risen! Come and see.