

Sermon Easter Day 2009

Resurrection is new life. The New Testament word for it is *anastasis* – from which we get the lovely name *Anastasia* - and it means *standing up again after you're dead*. So Our Lord's Resurrection was real – not, as the church's theological colleges have taught for so long – a metaphor for particular sorts of social and political policies. There is a widespread misconception that Christianity teaches the immortality of the soul. It does not teach anything so attenuated and rarefied. The Christian faith is an incarnated faith. Christ the Word became flesh. And his Resurrection was a bodily Resurrection.

But beware. Christ's resurrected body was neither a ghost nor a re-animated corpse. Sometimes the risen Christ ate and drank with his disciples. Thomas could put his fingers in the holes the nails had made. But Jesus sometimes walked through walls to appear to his disciples. His Resurrection body was something new and different and yet always recognisably him. What was it? Or, I should say what *is* it? For Christ's resurrected body is the prototype of what we shall all be eternally after we are raised up at the Judgement. St Paul puts it beautifully: *Christ is the first fruits of them that slept*.

Let me continue with St Paul for a bit. He is so marvellously instructive on these matters. He says: *But some will say, 'How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?'* And St Paul replies, *Thou fool! That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die*.

And there you have it, the gist of these three tumultuous days Good Friday to Easter Sunday – the fundamental historical and spiritual reversal from death to life. It is so bewildering, shocking that it threatens to knock us out – like the astronaut KO'd by G-factors. But the very shocking fact is not that Christ rose from the dead, but that he really and truly died. Naturally, materialist philosophers dismiss all this as hokum. Do you want some good news? After the discoveries in quantum mechanics, there aren't as many materialist philosophers around as there used to be. In fact, on purely philosophical grounds, most philosophers today have come to the conclusion that materialism cannot be the basic truth about the universe – *and precisely because the thoughts and words necessary even to teach materialism are not themselves made out of material*.

Is the resurrection against the laws of nature then? Not at all. We must understand that God knows a lot more about the laws of nature than natural scientists. God did after all invent the laws of nature. Natural scientists, physicists if you like, don't actually know very much about the laws of nature. For they have concluded that 96% of the universe is missing. 96% of everything, they say, is *dark* matter and so cannot be observed at all. Imagine a child in junior school going to the arithmetic teacher and telling him that his sums were invalid for 96% of everything. The

teacher would suggest that there is nothing wrong with everything, but everything wrong with the lad's sums.

Throughout the decayed, surrendered Church of England, thousands of sermons will be preached today on the theme of the Resurrection as *new life*. And here again we are back among the weary metaphors: the Resurrection debased until it becomes only a figure of speech for fashionable policy initiatives: abolishing greed, saving Africa by the pronouncements of aging rock stars and saving the planet by low energy light-bulbs and windmills. (Incidentally, why is the word *initiative* so often on the lips of those utterly without any initiative?)

The modern church is full of exciting initiatives. I read in *Church Times* that The Archbishop of Canterbury has awarded the cross of St Augustine to a bishop *for recognition of his work as team leader of Fresh Expressions*. The Cross of St Augustine for disco music in the chancel? Why not the Martin Luther Award for lap-dancing. You only have to go round the corner as far as St Ethelburgh's for initiative. There you can join in *Convocations for the soul. Get to know someone of a different faith through tandem dialogue – open floor story-telling kicked off by Jumana Moon*. Can't wait! I'll be round there first thing Easter Monday!

Even social conservatives – those very respectable people who don't actually believe that the Christian faith is true but think it's a good basis for morality and social order – even social conservatives think that Resurrection means something like a renewal, like a return to what they regard as the right way, like a back-to-basics project or, as they say, *the swing of the pendulum*. These people are like Voltaire, who didn't believe Christianity himself, but thought it an excellent thing *for the servants*

And they are wrong. Wrong because they don't understand just how radical and shocking the Christian preaching of the resurrection actually is. *That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die*. In other words, before the Resurrection, there was, and is, a real death. *Christ is the first fruits of them that slept*. Now, once you see the truth of this, you see that it does apply to social structures and to politics and the whole history of the human race.

Individually we are flawed and faulty and so we fail. Societies and great nations rise and fall – because they are made up of these same flawed and faulty human beings. This has happened again and again. You'd think, by now, we might recognise the symptoms. The ancient Jews were utterly defeated and carried off into exile. The Assyrians and the Persians fell. What befell the glory that was Greece? The immovable Roman Empire was moved: it declined and fell. And now we are living through the last days of the decline of the West. Our individual and social history is after the pattern of death and resurrection: but a real death before a real resurrection.

The forces of decay have now taken such a hold on Western society that we have tipped over from decadence to apocalypse or, in biblical terms, from death to judgement. And there will be

a judgement. A few days before his Crucifixion, Our Lord spoke to his disciples who were admiring the great city:

Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.

The good news of Easter is that Resurrection will follow death. Not by social policies, not by a swing of the pendulum or back to basics. There is only one possible form of good news and it is that our human nature has been redeemed. Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification. How can I put this in terms the City would understand? We are full of toxic assets. That's sin. But it is not Mr Brown who has come to save the world: it is Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are all pretty perverse and mired in sin, selfishness, beset by delusions of ambition, success, well-being and fulfilment. All these things end in death. But cheer up. God made each one of us in his own image. And so you are able to respond to him, to turn to him, if you will, and to be lifted from your living death by the power of Christ's Resurrection. Alleluia!