

THE “CREDIBILITY” OF THE RESURRECTION ELTON PARISH CHURCH, EASTER 2010

Address by Sir Leslie Fielding, Reader Emeritus

“God raised him to life on the third day” St Peter, in Acts, ch 10, v 40.

Earlier today, the Rector explained to us, in well-chosen terms accessible to the Laity, the meaning of Easter Day, as it has been understood by the Catholic and Apostolic Church for 2,000 years. I will attempt to follow through in more secular terms, addressed to the sceptical and materialist context in which – until things take a turn for the better – we live our lives in Britain today. I will take the Bible story first ; then, second, consider how it can be squared with contemporary science.

The Bible story carries conviction, because what happened transformed a rather mediocre group of followers into heroes. They had not expected their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, to come back. The Apostles on their way to Emaus did not at first recognise Him, as they walked and talked. It was not easy for them to find words to describe the experience. It was clearly not a subjective hallucination, but a real event, for numbers of people, on separate occasions. Above all, one which restored their faith and hope. They do not speak of a zombie-like resuscitated corpse, a kind of “living dead man” in a Haitian Voodoo cult. Their witness is to a Jesus raised to new life, a new level of being, a transcendence. But also utterly real. This Jesus came and went behind locked doors ; appeared and vanished ; yet also took bread and offered the Apostles breakfast by the Sea of Tiberias.

Significantly, Scripture does not toe a conformist “party line”. The accounts in different Gospels overlap and confirm each other ; but are not identical. And I find it especially convincing that the first news of the empty tomb is brought to the men by a woman. Remember that, in ancient Israel, as indeed in some Arab societies today, women were subordinate, perhaps not even entirely trustworthy, without male corroboration and authority.

But let me now move to the Natural Sciences, today. How are we to understand the Resurrection, in contemporary terms? The answer is that we cannot – not because of any unreality in the event, but because of the limitations of human knowledge and understanding. We can only go so far – then we have to make an act of faith, for or against.

Because we are Christians, does not mean that we must take leave of our God-given intellectual faculties, or forsake critical thinking. Even among the Apostles, Thomas had his doubts – and was forgiven them, by Jesus Himself. People are free, if they wish, to deny the very existence of God, let alone the miracles and mysteries of the Faith. And yet, I am struck by how many modern thinkers are also traditional believers. At the University of Sussex, when I was Vice-Chancellor, of the top four astronomers, one was a wistful agnostic, one a practising Jew, while the other two were Christians – a Free Churchman (the famous John Barrow, now Professor of Mathematical Sciences at Cambridge) and an Anglican Lay Reader. The Astronomer Royal, Lord Rees of Ludlow, likes going to Church. Just before Christmas, I heard a talk in the Bishop Mascall Centre in Ludlow by Professor John Polkinghorne, the well-known writer, Cambridge theoretical physicist – and Anglican priest. The latest Darwinist and evolutionary biologist, the brilliant young Professor Simon Conway of Cambridge, is also a professed Christian, who puts a

completely different interpretation on human evolution from that of the passionate atheist, Richard Dawkins.

It needs to be said, here, that even the brightest of us suffer from the very real limitations of the human brain. Homo Sapiens began to emerge only very recently in the history of life on earth – perhaps 100,000 years ago. As Lord Rees has recently pointed out, the brain structures and capacities with which we are now endowed are essentially still those of a biped, learning desperately to survive in an African savannah. It has been suggested that, for this reason alone, we would not necessarily even recognise intelligent life from Outer Space, for what it was, if there were any and it somehow made itself manifest. Just as the Apostles did not recognise their travelling companion on the way to Emaus.

The fact is that we live our daily lives with things that we can hear, see and touch – things in three dimensions of space – and we imagine that that is all there is. The revolution in physics that occurred 100 years ago, with the discovery of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, only serves to illustrate – as Max Planck once observed – that science progresses one funeral at a time. We still do not understand what we see.

At the level of the tiniest possible atomic sub-particles, Quantum Mechanics suggest the seemingly impossible : particles capable of being in two places at once (so-called “Super Position”), or particles – originally conjoined but subsequently widely separated – remaining in touch at a distance (“Quantum Entanglement”). At the other end of things, we thought we had begun to understand “Big Bang” cosmology. But scientists now think that only 5% of the observed universe is made up of matter and energy – 20% is “dark matter” and 75% is “dark energy”. We have no idea what these things are. There is now even something described as “dark flow”, which seems to be somehow part of the fact that the expansion of the universe from the original Big Bang, 13.5 million years ago, far from slowing down in accordance with the laws of gravity, is actually speeding up.

Or, just try to imagine that you live in only two dimensions. You can move forwards, backwards and sideways. But not upwards. Perhaps we are a little bit like that, where God is concerned. “Flat worlders”, cannot imagine three-dimensional reality. And even if they could, their problems would only have just begun. Einstein added a fourth dimension, namely that of time. Yet time is not a constant – Einstein concluded that is slowed down at speeds approaching the speed of light. “String theory” is currently out of fashion. But theoretical physicists have been postulating the existence of up to eleven dimensions, although they cannot verify them by direct observation or experiment.

Perhaps, therefore, we just have to accept our own limitations, and put our trust in God? Or think of God as the fifth dimension – as Sir John Houghton, the meteorological scientist, suggests? Or we can simply turn to our Shakespeare. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Hamlet).

And so back to Easter. As our Wigmore Abbey lectionary puts it, we are confronted with “the zenith of God’s creative power it brings new possibilities, new hopes in our innermost lives and to our outward actions and initiatives”. Hallelujah! Christ is Risen! Yes, He is risen indeed.

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