

HOPE AND NOT OPTIMISM

St. Michael's Cornhill

Easter V

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If you make your way from Lorraine in eastern France on your way to the Pas de Calais, you will, as likely as not, pass through the town of Verdun. Verdun is almost without equal as the saddest place in France. In this place in 1916, 100 years ago next year, took place perhaps the bloodiest of all the battles of the Great War. The German forces had effectively been commanded by their general to 'take no prisoners' as the old saying goes. This was in revenge for similar losses on the German side. As you pass Verdun, a small detour will take you to the village of Douaumont. Here, in a rather beautiful building, with its own tapering tower is a vast ossuary, a bone house gathering some of the thousands killed in that most bloody battle.

Ossuaries, or charnel houses are both macabre and moving. Let me tell one more story. Twenty five years ago I visited the remote monastery of St. Catherine on the lower slopes of Mount Sinai. We stopped for refreshments and an afternoon nap. We had all been up climbing the mountain at three o'clock in the morning! When we got out of our hammock-like beds after the nap, the monk looking after us pointed out their construction. They were on flimsy frames, and immediately beneath them was a broadly set grill beneath which was a charnel house, a pit full of bones, the remains of generations of Orthodox monks. We had been slumbering on top of an ossuary.

Now what has spurred on this sudden interest in what one might call *a skeletal study*? Well the answer is twofold. First we are still firmly within the season of the resurrection. Death and life are the focus of our lives as Christian people. Furthermore, the Christian creeds talk of the 'resurrection of the body'. So, the material aspect of our existence matters – bones give us our framework and shape. Remember Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of dry bones. They came together to form living beings. It was a vision, an image of life in the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the spiritual goes: 'Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones – now hear the word of the Lord!'

But there is another reason why this curious subject of bone houses is the focus. Some three or more years ago, the wife of the Bishop of Worcester, Denise Inge, began to reflect on the fact that the house in which she and her family lived was built over a charnel house, a house of bones, an ossuary. Denise, as a writer, had already written about the great Anglican seventeenth century writer, Thomas Traberne. She was a clever lady and a beautiful writer.

The curious fact that she lived over the old Benedictine monastic charnel house intrigued her. With the help of friends, she set out on a tour of four other such places - in Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland. On her return she began to write a book, which was eventually published just last autumn. It is called simply, *A Tour of Bones*. It is a most beautiful book, and not least because it reflects, at the deepest possible level, on our existence and on death and resurrection.

I need to add one more factor into all this. Halfway through first preparing to write the book, in Lent 2013, Denise felt ill. She went for tests and they discovered a tumour, a sarcoma twisting around an abdominal artery. It was inoperable. To shrink it she received the

most radical chemotherapy such that she eventually had to be taken off it for fear of her life. Four months later, after coming off the chemo, on Easter Day 2014, she prepared the normal Easter feast for her family – they all had lunch together. That afternoon she went to bed for a nap and died in her sleep. Her funeral was unforgettable – tragically sad, yet a great affirmation of life, faith and resurrection.

Our readings today give support for such faith. In that first reading, following and because of, the Resurrection of Jesus, Peter and his companions were all caught up into the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. It was, as I say, a response to Jesus' resurrection. The words too, in the second reading from the first letter of John, celebrate the fruit of such faith: love of God and love of one another – 'whoever is born of God conquers the world. So, too, in the Gospel, we heard God's love 'celebrated' - in words Jesus speaks to his disciples. What might this mean for us?

About half way through Denise's book, one hits a passage which is an essential understanding of the Easter message. She writes: 'We cannot live *well long without hope.*' Hope, of course, is the essence of resurrection faith. It is a trust in the eternal love of God. Furthermore it is not at all the same as optimism. 'Optimism', Denise notes, 'is largely passive; it is about waiting for what is better to come to you.' Hope, however, on the other hand is *active*; it goes out and does. She notes in relation to this: 'Hope falls and fails sometimes, but it is tenacious and unafraid.' It is, if you like, the very power of life. It gives us the courage to work with God in Jesus to change his world. *That then is our Easter faith.* Alleluia, Christ is risen: He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen

Readings: Acts. 10. 44 – end, I. John. 5. 1-6, John. 15. 9-17