

## Sermon: Easter Day 2011...

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. This marks the glorious beginning of the Christian era. And it has been glorious. Christianity has nurtured the flowering of a civilisation spectacular in its achievements. The philosophy of Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm and Duns Scotus has created a metaphysical understanding which made possible an enduring perspective on the nature of humankind and, through its doctrine of the rationality of God, encouraged the development of science. Lest we forget, Copernicus was taught the heliocentric theory in a monastery.

In architecture, sculpture and painting, men inspired and nourished by Christian civilisation have uncovered a true sense of reality and its correspondence with all that is best and most genuine in human intuition and feeling. Western art has, time and again throughout the Christian centuries, established a true relationship and balance between intelligence and emotion: an aesthetic as well as an epistemology. A sensitivity to beauty and the grasp of truth.

In building, we have the great cathedrals, witnesses to God in glass and stone, and to the faith of those who persevered over centuries in their making – a man knowing that neither he nor even his son's son would live to see the job finished. In every town and village in Europe, a parish church – demonstrating that we live our lives both in community and in praise of God.

The Christian church gave us modern music – but by *modern music* I don't mean what is usually meant by that term. I mean, in place of Greek monodony, the glorious polyphony and counterpoint begun a thousand years ago in places like Notre Dame and developed by such as Perotin and Hildegard and the other medieval musicians through Byrd and Tallis, Palestrina, and on to Bach, Purcell, Mozart and Beethoven, even to the great composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of course, civilisation is constantly under threat from barbarism, and we are under that threat today in the pernicious idolatry which describes as *music* that which is not music. And so nowadays the place of music in the public perception is a variation on Gresham's Law about money: the bad drives out the good. With all

the usual lies told by our modern barbarians – the educators and propagandists for fashionable tastes - to the effect that if only we introduce people to enough of the bad, they will learn to love what is good.

In visual art, Christianity presents and preserves the Divine Presence in the icons and in the paintings of such as Giotto and the other medieval masters. And in the great modern painters the sense of what is transcendent, the beyond in our midst, that brooding sense of reality within the appearances is encouraged. Such is the work of Rembrandt and Turner and Van Gogh and many more.

As with music, so with art, the barbarians are not merely at the gates, they are in the city, sitting at high table and feeding obscenely on its wares. Since Duchamp's *Urinal* dirt has been done upon art in the name of art – as in the blasphemous fraud of the pickled sheep and the unmade bed. Or in the grotesque and dangerous distraction to passing motorists called *The Angel of the North* - known, I believe, to the locals as *The Geordie Flasher*.

Christian civilisation has given us an intellectual and emotional life worth living. I have not even mentioned poetry, drama and the novel – those other examples of the word made flesh. No time even to give thanks for the decent set of political liberties which we derive from the Commandments to love God and to love our neighbour. Or our great tradition of philanthropy based on the Christian teaching about charity. Health care for the poor which owes its origin to the medieval institution of the hospice. Fellowship and friendship based on the Christian notion of Philadelphia – love of the brotherhood.

All these things we rejoice in today: Easter when it all began. And yet, glorious as Christian civilisation and culture have been, they are not the root and centre. The root and centre is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. You cannot have this civilisation without the risen Christ. As St Paul put it to the sceptical Corinthians:

*If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain and ye are yet in your sins*

So let us be very clear: Christian civilisation and history is not the result of an *idea*. It is the result of an event. And that event is the death and resurrection of Christ.

Resurrection? You may think it's a tall story, but it's not such a tall story as all the alternatives. Or do you imagine the first disciples just made it all up – and then gladly went out to suffer persecution, torture and execution for what they knew to be a lie?

We are asked to exercise a little humility here. Raising his Son from the dead is not beyond the power of God who made the heavens and the earth. Unless of course you are seduced by the fashionable new atheism. What needs most to be said about this new atheism is not that it's atheistic but that it's ignorant and simple-minded to the point of fatuity. Have you read the zoologist Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*? You should. In this book he actually says that if God exists we ought to be able to detect him in our telescopes and other scientific instruments – as if God were orbiting the earth, up above the world so high, like a tea-tray in the sky. But no Christian theologian has ever said that God is a mere object in his own universe.

Unlike Christianity, the new atheism is irrational. One of its outstanding claims is that God was not needed for the creation of the universe. The law of physics did it all by themselves. This is as if we should say that the laws governing the operation of deck chairs on Margate sands were in operation before there was such a place as Margate. Well might Mr Eliot say,

*On Margate sands I can connect nothing with nothing*

In any case, if there are such things as the laws of physics, we don't know what they are. Our supposed understanding of the laws of physics has changed so many times from Archimedes to Newton, from Newton to Einstein and from Einstein to the present. I have been reading the latest fashions in astrophysics where it is claimed that 96% of the matter in the universe is missing. It's so called *dark matter*. Now look, if I had presented to my physics master a paper which appertained to only 4% of all there is and claimed that it wasn't my fault that the other 96% was missing, he would tell me to go back and do my sums again.

I can recommend a new book, *The Trouble with Physics* by the distinguished theoretical physicist Leo Smolin. He says there has been no improvement in our

understanding of physics since the dominance of the so called *standard model* in the 1970s. Why not?

Smolin points out that there are now more theoretical physicists than ever. So you might expect some progress to be made. But, Smolin says, they are all competing for research money. As ever, the fashionable theory gets almost all this money. If there were enough money to go round, physicists who disagree with the fashionable theory would also get some of it. But there isn't. And funding bodies play safe. So those researchers who accept the fashionable theory get all the money. Nobody can afford to be unfashionable. So research physics becomes moribund.

The truth, meanwhile, is that, if there are such things as the laws of physics, they are God's laws.

The life of the Church began at the resurrection. And this life has been lived by Christians for 2000 years. It is now our turn. We are called to continue this Christian era, Christian life, Christian civilisation, Christian society. And, to be precise, we are called in our baptism. In the early church baptisms were performed on Easter Eve. And to be a Christian means to live a life of joy while at the same time being involved in a fight to the death. This Christian fight is what it always was: it is against ignorance and barbarism.

And the modern ignoramuses and barbarians are just as ignorant as the old sort – though they now conduct their iconoclasm electronically, a gadgeteered black Sabbath. Pandaemonium and persecution have gone global. Christians need grace and strength for the fight. So, as they did in the early church, let us arm ourselves with the baptismal prayer:

*We do sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross in token that we are not ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world and the devil; and to continue Christ's faithful soldiers and servant unto our lives' end. Amen*

