

## **ANYTHING BUT THE RESURRECTION IS A LOAD OF \*\*\*\***

*A week ago, give or take a couple of hours, I was in a public house in Oxford; the girl in front of me in the queue asked for a half of 'C S Lewis' favourite beer' and I realised I had come to a shrine. This was the pub that Lewis and his mate Tolkien, and others, used to meet in every week to read to each other things they had just written. I was in Oxford attending a conference on medieval cloisters, as one does, and had seen slides of many monuments and places of pilgrimage, each one commemorating some saint or other, often through the possession of some fragmentary portion of their earthly remains. Then in the pub I had an awareness-of-the moment experience; it suddenly dawned on me that I was at the shrine of the saint who had, through the written and printed word, communicated the truth of the Christian gospel to me, and very many others.*

*And I want to start this week with a quote from Lewis' autobiography, 'Surprised by Joy' It is the mid 1920s, Lewis is still an agnostic, and he is talking with his old tutor, who does not profess any belief either; talking about the recurring themes, the common myths and motifs that are shot through all religions the world over, like sacrifice and death and resurrection. 'Rum thing' said the tutor, 'all this stuff about the dying and rising god, seems it really happened once'.... The phrase stuck in Lewis' head and troubled him; it sticks in mine and encourages me.*

*Because this is the core of what it is all about, of what everything is all about. IT REALLY HAPPENED. It is obvious, it is basic, and yet we constantly need to be reminded of it, to take it on board once again, to hang on to it on sweet sunny afternoons and in the dark in sweaty nightmares as well. This basic fact is constantly under siege, from two sides.*

*There was a sermon long ago which veteran stepping-stoners, greying, balding and long-in-the-tooth, may remember. We were seen as sailors, and encouraged to steer a course between two equal and opposite dangers, called Scylla and Charybdis. In classical mythology, I think they were whirlpools; the picture is of very real danger to the left and the right, but a safe passage between them for the steady of hand and stout of heart. I think we – and without being horribly pretentious I could say the Christian Church as well – need to be aware of where we stand at this moment in time, and how to recognise that sudden tug of the current, that patch of choppy water, that is going to suck us into the helpless ever-decreasing circles then down into the vortex, the maelstrom at the centre..*

*The narrow strait of safe passage between the two, both our journey and our destination, is the Gospel, the Good News, the way that God chose to reveal himself and open a door to us; the message that Jesus died for all of us and Jesus is alive for all of us, summed up as Jesus-and-the-Resurrection which Paul emphasised so much that some people thought he was advocating a pair of new deities.*

*To the left, or maybe the right (because I don't want to be political) is a common*

*modern politically correct point of view, one that is supposed to enable us to live at peace with all faiths. It was exemplified by an Independent columnist a few weeks ago, who, offering their solution to the current problem of world religions not getting on together, explained his acceptable take on Christianity. Jesus had been a good guy, said some really remarkable and wise things, but, sadly, would up crucified; after he died, his followers got together and recalled his wise sayings! Wow! It all seemed so real, it was almost as if he was still alive... so (lets not blame them) they embroidered a few stories, and of course that rather dodgy character Paul turned up with plans to form a new religion. This was presented, not as an opinion, but as commonly-accepted fact. Some very popular media figures seem to present a similar hypothesis; Rabbi Lionel Blue for instance, lovely man, great on thought for the day, the sort of person who it is churlish to criticise (and especially by me, bearing in mind what I have said about finger-pointing in the past. But in a colour supplement article he spells out his faith – he picks out the bits he fancies from of several religions, and ignores the bits he does not like (read quote). A pick-and-mix package guaranteed to make friends and win you air time; but where do Jesus-and-the Resurrection fit in; of course he does not say. He does say he thinks Christianity too narrow and too exclusive*

*You see, if you want to start your own religion, personal or global, the fact that the one you aim to supplant has the trump card of the Resurrection is hard to get around. Here I am going to stray into dangerous ground, saying something that has to be said. The Prophet Mohammed claimed to have taken down the Koran at the express dictation of God; Jesus gets mentioned in the Koran, even the Virgin Birth is OK – but not the crucifixion and resurrection. Because it states that there was a clever last-minute substitution trick, some other un-named person got crucified instead of Jesus ..he escaped to live out his natural life elsewhere.... Oh, and he does have a Second Coming, but only to touch down and say that Christians had got it wrong and Mohammed was the real prophet. All I can say is that, if God dictated this version, he was suffering a surprising lapse of memory as regards a rather key episode in the life of his son.... But, as I say, if you want to start a new religion, you have a problem.*

*That is one danger, a pseudo-Jesus who says wise things, steps carefully around the bits too hard for us to believe, and lives on as a warm memory. It won't offend non-believers, will enable you to live happily in a multi-cultural society, but basically is a load of crap. A faith that misses out on the Resurrection is no faith at all, OK on a sunny afternoon but utterly without substance in a winter storm.*

*That is one danger; but there is a second, on the opposite side of the road. The Devil often synchronises his attacks in pairs, equal and opposite errors. If New-Age Liberalism can be seen as Jesus-and-the-Resurrection minus, there is also peril at the other end of the scale, Jesus-and-the-Resurrection plus. If the first danger is largely outside the Christian Church, the second is largely within the ranks of card-carrying Christians, and especially amongst those who wear large fluorescent cards on their sleeves. It is in part a danger of Reaction, an understandable reaction against the vague and the liberal. It emphasises the literal*

*truth of the Bible – but not just the Resurrection – every bit of the Old Testament as well. You are not a real Christian unless you believe in a literal Adam and Eve and a 4000 BC creation. Not a real Christian unless you espouse some particular teaching on the Gifts of the Spirit, or technique of healing, or Interpretation of the End Times (and cast your vote or do your own little bit to make sure Armageddon happens on time...). It is here, actually, that the New Age really gets into the church, in the people who rail most loudly against it. Because in the New Age there is no central authority, everyone does their own thing, like that sad verse at the end of the Book of Judges ‘in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit’.. The Church of England seems busy self-destructing because, rightly or wrongly, no-one accepts centralised authority any more. Yet some people who shout loudest about Jesus seem furthest from his way of doing things. Last year Megan and I had three days in Bruges, and went to the midweek meeting of Bruges Baptist Church, which turned out to be run by two American couples who saw themselves as missionaries in a non-Christian society. After the study I chatted to the fifteen year old son of one of the couples and asked him, as boring old people do to young persons, what his ambitions were. They were to get straight back to the States as soon as he was sixteen, so he could join the Air force, and, as these were the End Times, to get in on the action. He lit up at the thought. The action I presume meant killing people, God’s enemies of course. How different was his attitude from that of Islamic suicide bombers? Nearer to home,; a few weeks ago Elaine went to a meeting of a new church group which intends to establish itself in Hexham (I, perhaps wisely, didn’t – I am supposed to avoid stress). The leader preached about how we should get back to the glorious days of the Crusades, and stop other religions opening places of worship in this country. If old-fashioned Anglicanism was equated with the Tory party at prayer, this one was the BNP at praise-and-worship. Help.... One issue I really struggle with is that I used to think that if people talked a lot about Jesus, and did evangelical-type things, and the bums-on-pews count grew, then Hallelujah!, the Kingdom was expanding., but the world is a darker place, and Satan more subtle. When the devil goes out at night, he calls in at a cloakroom, on the right, just inside the gates of hell. There on a rack he keeps a set of masks, one for each of the leaders and holy men of all the world’s religions; sad to say, I fear he has even got one with the face of Jesus, or something that Christians can be misled into thinking looks like the face of Jesus. on it..*

*So peril to the left and peril to the right, where does that leave us, little flock bobbing on the waves in our boat. Well, it leaves us with, to quote CS Lewis again, ‘Mere Christianity’, just Jesus-and-the- Resurrection, only that, is it enough?*

*I think it is enough. I think we can respect people of other faiths, be friends with them and learn from them. We can go some way along the road with them, and see them as Irvine says, as God seekers. I was in a Sikh temple recently, wearing a makeshift turban and talking to the priest, who was a saintly man, who knew God was good and loved all mankind – but I don’t think he consciously knew Jesus-and-the-Resurrection.*

*We've got to be honest, in a society where it is very difficult to be honest in a growing number of areas. If the Gospel is true - notice I am not saying if we are right, if the Gospel is true, then other claims of access to God cannot be equally true. Living in peace, respect., friendship, all these are essential, but there comes a point where you have to say 'I am sorry, if pushed to it, I honestly believe your information is incorrect. The Koran cannot be right when it says this..... Hindu friend, I believe that there is only one God... (OK lets run through the gamut of world religions.... to South Sea Islanders of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not God who flies in those aeroplanes you have started seeing in your skies ..... to Melanesian Frog Worshippers - I'm sorry, but, actually, He is not a frog...*

*Real love for others is not to compromise, and mumble platitudes about all roads leading up the same mountain, but to hold to our belief that what we are celebrating today was the central event in earth's history, an earthquake that fractured the fabric of time, the one event after which nothing will ever be the same. It actually happened; the details in the Gospels are rather garbled, just as you would expect reading unedited eyewitness accounts by stunned and shaken humans whose world had been turned upside down. The physics, the chemistry, the washing line on which Jesus found his white robe after he emerged from the tomb, don't matter.*

*What does it mean, how do we get hold of it, how do we live it? We've got to keep finding out. But remember this, it comes in useful in the end. Because in the end we all meet death (Ok evangelical get out – unless Jesus comes first). But Jesus has met death first, and defeated death. We don't often talk about death. Any Terry Pratchett fans here? In his novels Death is an attractive character, Skull, robe, scythe, TALKS IN CAPITAL LETTERS, is generally a decent guy, and likes cats (so he's OK by me) – and seems to take people to whatever they really desired in this life. A skeletal bringer of happy endings. In an interview, I read something that quite frightened me - Terry Pratchett said that the greatest part of his post bag was from older people asking for assurance that death was really like that. Because deep down we are all scared; death is not really a benign figure; he is Old Joe Death with Satan's power to scare, grimacing, gibbering, foul of breath, some grotesque medieval painting struggling into animation and peeling itself off the wall, then either suddenly leaping out BOO YOU'RE DEAD! or slowly and inexorably approaching, a shambling black silhouette against the sunset. Now, to some believers who meet him with firm faith, he has already lost all his power. They have got far enough along the road to see that; St Francis calls him kind and gentle death, waiting to still our latest breath, merciful release from mortal pain, simply God's composter waiting to recycle the discarded and spent physical part of you as part of a sustainable planet, to push up happy daisies. Great if you've got there, strip away the Devil's lies and that is actually the behind-the-scenes reality (but don't stand too close brother, your halo is dazzling me). But for many it is not quite like that.*

*And if your faith is in anything but Jesus-and-the-Resurrection, then you are lost. What is your heart really orientated on, what do you really worship? Money? Too*

*late, being Howard Hughes won't help you now; Sex? You poor fool, it's all over Viagra versus Rigor Mortis?, no contest. Human Nature? Human nature ensured the crucifixion of Jesus, not his Resurrection. Being middle class and nice? No hope, nice in the end becomes damnably nice, because all our righteousness, all our niceness, is as filthy rags. From this point on there is only saved or lost, salvation or damnation if you like those phrases, no shades of grey any more, no theological niceties. At this point, anything but the Resurrection is a load of... I could use a Pauline phrase here. So get the Resurrection, get in on the Resurrection, if there is anything in the way between you and it, get it sorted out now, if you've got a wall in the way, tell us and we'll bring our sledgehammers. If you have too much baggage to take it on board, ditch the lot here and now. But with Jesus-and-the-Resurrection, at the approach of Old Joe the gossamer thread of faith can become tungsten-hardened steel; as terror-bringer, the devil's emissary, he is a sham, already defeated. The devil always was a liar, you know. You can tell him where to go, put the boot in, make him grin on the other side of his skull, send his bones rattling down the hall. You are with your friend, your older brother, he has seen through death, he has been through death, death is just a dancing shadow on the door, the door opens, and light pours through from the other side, so much light even your memory of the shadows has gone...*

*It was Friday, but Sunday's come*