



Sung Eucharist in Eastertide (May 19th 2019)

Revelation 21: 1-6 & Luke 24: 13-35

On my journey from Woolwich to Gray's Inn the DLR, the Docklands Light Railway, passes the Thames-side factory where Tate & Lyle still make their Golden Syrup, or Treacle. And the large poster on the building shows the well-known green and gold tin which still bears a picture of a rather mangy dead lion from which a swarm of bees are emerging, and the legend "out of the strong came forth sweetness".

This is quite remarkable. How has it survived? You would have thought that the marketing consultants which the company surely employs would have long ago demanded a rebrand, a re-presentation, replacing this rather unsightly image of the dead or dying beast with, perhaps, a picture of an attractive healthy millennial and something like "Eat more Treacle – because you're worth it" or even "Become a golden girl by sticking with us".

Equally remarkable is any assumption that consumers will know the Biblical story from which it comes. We read in the Book of Judges how Samson fought and killed the lion, and when after a few days he passed the same spot he noticed that a swarm of bees had formed a comb of honey in its carcass. He was later to turn it into a riddle at a wedding: explain "Out of the eater came forth meat and out of the strong came forth sweetness".

Sitting on the train I wondered whether such an image could be helpful in understanding the Resurrection. You thought he was dead, but a very different kind of life has emerged. We could certainly do with some new ways of talking about what happened at Easter. Because anyone wanting to rebrand the Christian Gospel, to market it more effectively in this generation, finds two major obstacles at this time of Eastertide.

The first is that you can't talk about Resurrection without first admitting the existence, the reality, of Death. And that's a fatal flaw. At one time Death was all around us: people went off to war and did not return, many did not survive childbirth, children succumbed to disease, you were lucky if you achieved your "three score years and ten". But now, even though so many of us live so long, we hide Death away. Death no longer happens in the home but in the hospital, and medical staff can be treated as failures when they can't prevent it. Undertakers quickly take the body out of sight. It's as if we cannot cope with our mortality. Maybe one reason why religion has lost its popularity is because we still talk about death and dying.

We see this at funerals. Co-Op FuneralCare reported this month that for the first time the top ten items sung or played at funerals include no hymns. It's Ed Sheeran's "Supermarket Flowers" rather than Crimond, "You raise me up" by Westlife instead of Abide with me. Number One is now Frank Sinatra singing "My Way", having just squeezed out Monty Python's "Always look at the bright side of life".

So increasingly we hear people speaking not of someone dying but rather of their "passing". That always reminds me of Madame Arcati, the bumbling medium played gloriously by Margaret Rutherford in Noel Coward's Blythe Spirit: "tell me, dear, when did he pass over?" But today "passing" has no such destination. It's more in the sense of Master Mind, "pass": I don't know so let's not bother with that one.

Maybe we now fear death, not because we might meet our Maker, but because it brings us face to face with our mortality. We spend our lives avoiding the ultimate questions, pretending to be better than we are, avoiding the things we cannot face or face up to, and so ignoring the inevitable end-point. But in the end, to no avail.

If our culture, in our generation, finds it difficult to encounter Death, we find it equally difficult to accept the possibility of Resurrection. Yes, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but so much more.

David Jenkins when he was Bishop of Durham got into a lot of trouble when he said that the Resurrection was "not just a conjuring trick with old bones". What he meant was that you can believe in miracles, or not believe in them, but the far more important question is whether you believe that even in the face of Death, Life is possible. And if you believe that, well you might even believe that Jesus himself was raised from the dead, albeit not to what he was before, but to a new kind of life which he now invites us to share.

The message of Easter is that despite everything that the powers of death and darkness threw at Jesus the power of his life, the power of his love, was not defeated. Christians believe that this power was strong enough to raise him from physical death into a new kind of ongoing life, but if you find that difficult let that question be at the end of the process rather than the beginning. What the Easter Gospel fundamentally proclaims is that Death will never have the last word.

There are many planes to that, but I offer you just three.

First, Death will not have the last word when we look at ourselves. Somewhere underneath the genuine commitments and good intentions, but also the hidden fears and self-delusion, there is the real me, who needs affirming and supporting, but also healing and forgiving. When Jesus met people, including those whom respectable people despised, he made them his friends. After the Resurrection he took back those who had denied and deserted him. Without forgiveness we have no future. Death will not have the last word when we look at ourselves.

Second, Death will not have the last word when we look at our world. Faced with all the problems of our world it would be easy to give up, to surrender to pessimism, to stop

caring and be content with tutt-tutting at the news and do some occasional acts of charity. That way lies nationalism, populism, protectionism, and so racism and injustice of so many kinds. The message of the Resurrection is that these powers of darkness can be defeated. Death will not have the last word when we look at our world.

Third, Death will not have the last word when we look forward, beyond this earthly life. Who knows what lies ahead? I take with a pinch of salt the picture language of Scripture. But what the Resurrection urges us to believe is this: that just as Jesus came through the Cross to a new life, so we too, when we pass through the gate of death, enter not into a void, not into a nothingness which mocks all that we have been and hoped to be, but into the nearer presence of the One who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Death will not have the last word when we look forward, beyond this earthly life.

None of this denies the reality of death, within ourselves, in so much of the world which we see, and at the end of our time on earth. But it does present us with a radical choice. We can surrender ourselves to the darkness, the half-truths, the fatalism and pessimism, the kind of linear, reductionist world which scientific materialism has told us is as much as we can hope for. Or we can embrace a new Hope, sowing and nurturing the seeds of Resurrection. We can declare with Dylan Thomas. "And death shall have no dominion".

So here's a final image, of life out of death. In Hungary, early in 1945, Red Army troops finally overcame the German forces who had been occupying the city of Budapest. The surviving civilian population emerged from where they had been sheltering during the seven weeks of non-stop bombing, to find large parts of the city utterly destroyed. One man, a young composer, witnessed all this carnage, the dead bodies, the burnt-out buildings. He took refuge in the cellar of the Budapest Opera House. And it was there that Zoltan Kodály composed this Missa Brevis. It had its first performance in the Opera House cloakroom.

The text of the Eucharist affirms our Easter belief. Out of the strong, though dead, comes sweetness. Out of the cold, dark earth the green blade riseth. Out of death comes life. "Jesus suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures ... whose kingdom shall have no end". Amen