

'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Luke 24.6.'

'Jesus is not here' he has risen'. This is the great message of hope and new life which we Christians scattered all round the world proclaim to the whole world. From the Pope on the balcony of St Peter's speaking *urbi et orbi* ('to the city and to the world') to the humblest tin mission hut we shout out with joy the triumphant message, 'Christ has risen!' Death could not hold Jesus on Good Friday. Sin and evil had done their worst to him, but the almighty God was the one who had the last word, and his word was one of life and love. Everything about Jesus is life. 'In him was *life*, and that life was the light of men', said St John at very beginning of his gospel. Later at 10.10 John records Jesus' simple but direct mission statement: 'I have come that they might have *life*, and have it to the full'. And today we proclaim the Easter victory of life over death, love over hate, God over Satan. Life is what we Christian have been called in the name of the Lord Jesus to declare to the world. 'Christ is risen!'

I'm sure *everyone* loves life and wants to be fully alive. That isn't in dispute. The problem is where people *look* to be fully alive. Too many people look for heightened awareness through drugs and alcohol. In other words, they look for 'the living among the dead', as the angel said at the empty tomb.

I am always amazed at how clever some of the fake luxury goods are. Go on holiday abroad and you can pick up some wonderful fake Rolex or Tagheuer watches or Louis Vuiton handbags, can't you? They are what Del Boy from *Only Fools and Horses* would call 'genuine imitations'. Only an expert could

tell the difference between the fakes and the real things.

Our society is really into life these days, isn't it? Every town has a gym where you can hone your body to look like Adonis. I never realised that Adonis was 55 years old, did you? And with all the cosmetic surgery you can be 50 and still look like Claudia Schiffer. Orthodontists can give you the race-horse look. And now with amazing advances in medicine you can put off the ageing process and turn the old three score years and ten into the new 40. You may have read the other day that life-expectancy rose by a record 44 days last year. As a result more than 11 million people alive today can expect to live to more than 100 years old - 200,000 more than last year. So that's 17.6% of the population will live to over 100.

Yes, we're really into life these days. But look closer. Are we? In 2009 there were 189,100 abortions performed in England and Wales. There is increasing pressure for euthanasia to be legalised. We all now know about Dignitas in Switzerland, and there are even videos about euthanasia being shown in our schools to children. So we have this curious contradiction: we are striving to live longer, and yet we find extreme old age so intolerable that people want assisted suicide made legal, not to mention the fact that an ever-increasing ageing population is wrecking the pension system. For all our outward push for life, we actually have a culture of death. Abortion and euthanasia are now seen as merely the ultimate consumer choice. I suspect that many people dreading the end can't be sure that when it comes to it, they will be looked after properly. This way they can take control.

One of the most impressive places I have ever visited is the Cairo Museum with the special room of the mummified bodies of the pharaohs. I was transfixed gazing upon the 3000 year old body of the great Rameses II. Our secular craving for life cancelled out by our culture of death is like the ancient Egyptians desperately trying to cheat death by mummifying their bodies. However clever the mummification process is, the bodies are still dead. It's a clever fake.

And there's another very clever fake called *progress*. We are inventing new and better gadgets, improving the lot of our people through better politics and more laws. Education and health and social justice are all on the up. Change is good; new is better than old. Progress is possible and is making people happier. Who doesn't want to make life happier for everyone? But again, we are looking for the living among the dead. The politicians all *promise* change and progress, but do they actually deliver? Are they even *able* to deliver? Does science always promote progress? Science results in wonderful technology and medicine, but it also makes possible weapons of mass destruction and nuclear power stations which melt down. So-called 'progress' is often imposed on people through violent revolution, as the guillotines of France proved.

The message of Easter is that *true* life is found only in Jesus Christ, raised from the dead on the third day. Look to *Jesus* for life. Look for the living among the *living*. And look to him *also* for true progress. For years I used to see Christ's resurrection as an isolated, one-off event. It was as if God saw what satan had done to Jesus by getting him

crucified, but said, 'Oh no you don't', and then reversed the devil's work by raising him from the dead. Of course, Easter is indeed the triumph of life over death, love over hate, but the NT sees resurrection as far, far more even than that.

The NT sees the resurrection of Jesus Christ not just as a one-off event but the beginning of a long process of *renewal* of everything which one day will climax, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. When Jesus declared in Rev 21.5 'I am making everything *new*', he was not saying that 'new' is always better than old and that therefore we must undergo constant change. In fact what he was saying was that Christ is the means by which God is striving to get us back to the *old*, back to the Garden of Eden, to Paradise, when everything was originally good, and unspoilt by our sin and rebellion. That is why Paul says clearly in 1 Cor 15.20 on p1156, that Christ raised from the dead is but the beginning, the firstfruits ... So Easter Day is actually only the beginning of this process of renewal. This is *real* progress, by regressing back to Eden, and it is not something we do, or politicians do, but which *God* will do, vv22-28...

So, throughout the NT is this wonderful idea, which brings us all hope in this rotten, broken world - the 'restoration of all things' (eg *Matt* 19.28). Look to the risen Lord Jesus for life and for *real* progress. Even this communion meal is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is to come. Everything is being renewed, and it began at Easter. Watch out for clever secular fakes. Look for the living among the living, for there's no life, no progress, apart from Christ.