

He is not here; he has risen. Luke 24.6.

I am going to say something now that will anger many of you. It's very likely that I could lose my job over this. I can't stand Andrew Lloyd Webber! Sorry! I know that many of you love his musicals, but I think he is completely over-rated. His tunes are dreary and, frankly, forgettable. Give me Rodgers and Hammerstein, Steven Sondheim any day. You only have to hear their tunes once, and you're whistling them all day long. Andrew Lloyd Webber can't hold a candle to them. Sorry, folks. (Will I get out of this church alive today?)

But if the *music* is utterly banal and forgettable, the words are even worse. Do you remember *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*? There's a ridiculous song in that, 'Any Dream Will Do'. How could Tim Rice have written something so fatuous? Any dream? What about *Hitler's* dream to make a better world cleared of all the Jews, homos, and disabled? What about Lenin and Stalin's dream to make a fairer society by murdering all those millions who disagreed with them? Any dream will do? I don't think so. We need to have the *right* dream.

And now we have the latest, the so-called sequel to *Phantom of the Opera*. When we were in London recently Lloyd Webber's latest offering, *Love Never Dies*, was plastered all over the city. I don't know how Glenn Slater comes up with something so completely sentimental and wishful thinking. Love never dies? Of course love dies. If *people* who love die, and stay dead for ever, then the love they once had in their hearts dies, doesn't it? I often see memorial plaques on park-benches and headstones in cemeteries with words like 'For ever

in our hearts'. My first thought is, 'No he ain't; not if you don't believe in the Resurrection of Christ'. The harsh truth is this: if you don't believe in the literal truth of Easter as described by the Bible, the dead stay dead. In other words, our loved one is not in our hearts *for ever*. He's only in our hearts as long as we are alive to remember him. But once we die, he's forgotten. The love we have for someone will die the minute the one who did the loving dies.

To deny the truth of Easter, and yet to believe that love never dies is sheer wishful thinking. If you believe that the dead stay dead, then of course love dies. It dies with us. You can only say that love never dies if you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. Love does not exist apart from a person to *do* the loving. I see umpteen headstones with thoughts like, 'Re-united'. But again, that is sheer wishful thinking, if you don't believe that at Easter God raised Jesus from the dead. St Paul in his famous 8th chapter of *Romans* says that 'nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'. I believe that with all my heart, but I *believe* it because I know that Easter is true.

In another letter, the great 15th chapter of 1 *Corinthians*, St Paul says that when God raised Jesus from the dead, that was only the *beginning* of the process. Jesus was but the *firstfruits* of them that slept. So the belief that love never dies, and that one day we will be re-united with our loved ones is based on *fact*: the fact of the empty tomb, the fact that Jesus was physically raised from the dead at Easter. To *deny* this; to sneer at it as ridiculous, and then

say that 'love never dies' really *is* just desperate wishful thinking.

This Christian hope, on the other hand, is *not* wishful thinking. It is based on *fact*, the fact of the empty tomb. Of course, we have great difficulty with this Easter fact. It goes against everything we human beings *expect*. We expect the dead to stay dead. That's what *science* tells us. It's what logic, common-sense tells us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is very, very hard for us to accept, but let us never forget that it was just as hard for the people 2,000 years ago. We must not think that somehow we are smarter today, less gullible, more scientific than they were then. Just read your Bible and you will see that every single person there struggled with the empty tomb. St Luke tells us on p1061, at 24.5 that the women were *frightened*. Had this episode been made up, they would all have been relieved at the happy ending. No! they were scared - a very realistic touch, v5...

And then at v6 we are told they clearly had forgotten everything Jesus had warned them would happen, vv6-8...

When the women rushed to tell the men, the disciples did not believe them, vv9-11... Even the great St Peter didn't believe it. He had to go and see for himself, v12...

They all found it difficult to accept. Mary thought the risen Lord was the gardener. The two going to Emmaus had given up all hope. We all know about Doubting Thomas: unless I see the proof with my own eyes, I will never believe. Is Doubting Thomas so very different from any of *us*? And what about Saul of Tarsus, better known as St Paul? He was so dead against

this resurrection nonsense that he actively persecuted these deluded Christians until one day he got the shock of his life when the resurrected Jesus met him on the Damascus Road.

There is a ring of truth about the way the Bible records the empty tomb, *especially* the fact that all four gospels have *women* as the first witnesses. The testimony of a woman in a Jewish court was virtually worthless. If you were trying to make this story up to sell it to the Jews, you would hardly make up the fact that the first to find the empty tomb were women; *nor*, if the gospels were written much later when the disciples were now the grand old men of the church, would you portray the disciples as so slow and unwilling to believe.

No, there is a ring of truth about all this, and an important reminder to all of us today in our modern, scientific age that they struggled *also* with the incredible fact of the empty tomb that first Easter Day.

But you can't have it both ways. You can't sneer at the resurrection as nonsense and then say that love never dies. Love *doesn't* die, but *only* because of Easter. Because of the solid fact of Easter, Jesus has defeated death, and therefore death can no more separate us from the love of God. And we who are privileged to be 'in Christ' will be raised with him also.

It's a wonderful hope, but it is a hope based on a solid fact, the fact that one day in Palestine God raised his Son from the dead. Because, and *only* because of that fact, love never dies. Because of Easter, Jesus is the *living* Lord, still changing lives, still praying for us, still able to meet us in bread and wine at this table, as at Emmaus 2000 years ago.