

## Comment

'We may freely state that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine'. This quotation from Donald Gregor Smith seems to me, as it does to Canon Drinkwater ('The Dutch Catechism Revisited' in the *Catholic Herald*, June 1976), about as clear a denial of the doctrine of the resurrection as it would be possible to find. There are, as Fergus Kerr points out in his important article in this issue, many interpretations of what the resurrection is and what it means, even perhaps many mutually incompatible interpretations, but at least we can say what it unequivocally excludes: this is that Jesus is dead like other men and that his bones lie buried in Palestine. To point out, as Fergus Kerr does, that the stories of the resurrection appearances are theological explorations of the positive meaning of the resurrection rather than straight historical records is in no way to suggest that the resurrection 'did not happen'.

We can eliminate the paradox and power of this doctrine in two opposing ways: we can deny either that Jesus lives or that he died. His death is as much an article of the creed as his resurrection—indeed it is part of the latter doctrine. Jesus went into total and absolute failure, into real death. We are nowadays familiar with stories of people who have been clinically 'dead' but who have been revived by medical means, but precisely *because* they have been resuscitated we do not count them as having really died. Temporary death is not death. To revive a man who had been 'dead' in this way for all of three days would indeed be an astonishing thing, something surely outside the scope of medical science, comparable perhaps to some of the cures at Lourdes, a great miracle but not the resurrection. The gospel of the resurrection is not that death is temporary but that the rule of death is overcome. Jesus becomes one who is no longer ruled by death.

The gospel is not just that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the absurdity of the cross made sense, not just that there is meaning in a total failure and death which is an expression of ultimate love; the gospel is that this meaning is not to be sought somewhere else but is to be found in Jesus himself, in the body which is Jesus himself, that this meaning *is* Jesus himself. The meaning of the cross, then, is not to be found first of all in the good dispositions of a God other than Jesus who makes love triumph in the end, nor is the meaning to be found in the creation of a community of believers, nor in some 'spiritual' Jesus alien to his real material being; primarily the meaning of the cross is the new life, the new world, that the risen Lord constitutes.

The resurrection, like the eucharistic transformation and perhaps the creation, although it is dateable is not a change within time. We can date the eucharistic change because at this time, during this Mass, the bread ceases to be bread, we might be able to date the creation if we could say that before a certain time the world was not; in both cases the dating refers to what belongs to our world. Similarly we can date the resurrection, and even call it an event, by reference to the bones of Jesus—at some time it was no longer true to say that they ‘lie somewhere in Palestine’. But the resurrection is not itself, as resuscitation would be, a process within time, within history, rather it marks the mysterious unintelligible boundaries of history, the darkness beyond or within, which we know to be light. To deal with the resurrection in *narrative* form, as though it were an historical sequence, as is done in the stories of the resurrection appearances, is necessarily to use some kind of metaphorical language.

The risen Christ cuts into history, raises question marks over history—in the exploited and the oppressed, in the mysterious depths of love, in the sacramental signs of our loving solidarity with the oppressed, but the risen Christ is not historical, we encounter him not as a part of the process of human liberation but as the mystery within it.

The gospel is not that death is temporary (either the death of Jesus or our own), but that death is conquered by love, that our lives, our real bodily lives, have a meaning, a reality, that cannot be defined and confined by an objective historical account going from birth to death, the account of a process—even a process ‘continuing after death’.

To think of the risen Christ simply in terms of the post-resurrection appearances is to make the same kind of mistake as to *identify* the Kingdom with the future society of justice and peace. Such a liberated post-revolutionary society doubtless provides us with our best image of the Kingdom, but precisely because it is simply future (because injustice and exploitation are only temporary) it is no more than an image—just like the stories that suggest that Jesus’s death was only temporary.

Jesus really died: he went into the same oblivion into which we shall go, he was not resuscitated to live on further within either history or para-history, and his death is no more cancelled out by what his disciples learned from him or thought of him than our death will be cancelled out by the memories we leave behind us. His death was not cancelled, he was transformed; in him, in his real material person, death was conquered, death no longer circumscribes us; when we look for the signs of our circumscription, our definition, we find an empty tomb.

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