DYING WE LIVE

By GERARD W. HUGHES

IN THE FIRST SERMON recorded in Acts, Peter told the crowds: 'You killed him, but God raised him to life' (Acts 2, 24); This is the Good News, the essence of christianity. All the other sermons in Acts are elaborations on the first sermon of Peter.

Some laughed when they heard about the resurrection, others thought that the apostles were drunk; but some believed. On this belief the Church grew and spread.

The message is still being preached. Some laugh when they hear it, others think the preachers are mad; while a growing number of believers have either abandoned belief, or interpret resurrection in such a way that it does not really matter whether Christ rose again or not, whether we live on after death or not. Contemporary society, uncertain what to think about death, prefers not to think about it. We are all affected by this attitude. It is extraordinary that while death is the one future event about which we can be absolutely certain, we try to pretend it does not exist; certainly we act as though it did not exist. I have heard patients in some hospitals say that they could always tell when another patient in the ward was dying, because doctors used to hurry past the bed as though no one was in it. In medical schools there are all kinds of courses on the treatment of rare diseases. As far as I know, there are no courses on helping patients to die well. The growing support for euthanasia is, perhaps, symptomatic of our general unwillingness to face death. 'Let's get it over and done with as quickly, as unobtrusively and as expeditiously as possible, and call it – 'dying well'. When death does strike, there are elaborate rituals of hiding death. In the United States the patient rarely dies at home; or, if he does, he is laid out after his death in the splendour of a funeral parlour, dressed, painted and padded to look well and comfortable. When the body is eventually committed to the earth, the ground is immediately covered with imitation grass to help the mourners forget the ugly truth. Employees in the funeral business are no longer called 'undertakers'. They have now become 'grief facilitators', which means that they help the mourners not to grieve. Recently I met a social worker who had been told to look after a woman who had attempted suicide

several times. The woman's husband had died some months before. She was heartbroken, but all her relatives and friends were telling her 'to snap out of it', and get back to leading a normal life. To be 'normal' means to try and pretend that death does not exist. We do not want to think about it, because we do not know how to think about it. Our vision of life cannot find a place for death except as an ugly ending. We prefer not to think about it. Marshall McLuhan, in *The Mechanical Bride*, writes: 'It is a principle that the failure to face and evaluate unpleasant facts under conditions of art and controlled observation leads to a subsequent avalanche of the disagreeable' – a principle verified in the modern cult of portraying violent death in all its gruesome detail. As christians we share the contemporary attitude to death; we prefer to concentrate our attention on the social and political dimensions of Jesus's message today, giving little attention to the central message of christianity.

If modern man does not like facing the thought of death, he is even more disinclined to think about life after death. 'Literally conceived, the idea of an afterlife has no place, makes no sense and is inconsistent within the framework of the contemporary world picture'.[1] We may dislike the statement. We may say, 'if it is true, it is a judgment on contemporary society'. But is is true? If it is true, then we are wasting our time preaching life after death and resurrection to a world which can no longer make any sense of these terms. Some christian writers, recognizing this problem, have avoided it by interpreting resurrection so that it does not upset 'the contemporary world picture'. Milton Gatch, for example, says that 'the issue raised by the conflict between immortality (by which he means life after death of the soul without the body) and resurrection (of the body) has never been more crucial than at present, even although we must speak of immortality and resurrection not as facts, but as modes of approach to life'.[2] Immortality then comes to mean the individualist approach to life, resurrection means community existence, and death means annihilation. Another, Dr Schubert Ogden, writes: 'But what I must refuse to accept, precisely as a christian theologian, is that belief in our subjective existence after death is in some way a necessary article of christian belief'.[3] And a third, Paul van Buren, explains the resurrection as a figurative way

[1] Gatch, Milton, McG.: *Death: Meaning and Mortality in Christian Thought and Contemporary Culture* (New York, 1969).
[2] *Ibid.*, p 185.
[3] Ogden, Schubert: *Reality of God and Other Essays* (London, 1964), p 230.

of expressing the influence of Christ's life and work and words on the apostles.[4] Another states even more categorically: 'Jesus's work of bringing certainty to men was completed when he died abandoned by God and men'.[5]

In view of these contemporary attitudes to death and interpretations of the resurrection, how are we to stand as catholics? When I was a university chaplain, I used to hear students say, 'I don't think I'm a catholic any more. I can no longer believe in . . .' it might be God's existence, or transubstantiation, or infallibility, or life after death. I then used to ask them why they could not believe, and in listening I was treated to some extraordinary private theology. On life after death, for example, I would hear a grotesque theology in which vaguely remembered ancient myths, horrifying paintings of the last judgment, bits of Dante's *Inferno*, ghost stories, hell-fire sermons and the New Testament accounts were all mixed up together. It was good that they did not believe their own picture: sad that they should therefore abandon all belief in life after death.

This article is not an attempt to give a clear explanation of what we mean by life after death and resurrection. There is no clear explanation this side of the grave. It is possible only to offer some reflections on our attitude to doctrine in general, to the doctrine of life after death and of the resurrection in particular. I hope these reflections may help to remove some of the fears which prevent us seeing our lives in the perspective of death and resurrection and so rob us of the Good News.

In his first introductory observation to the *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius describes their purpose: 'We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our souls'.[6] Disordered attachments are usually thought of in the context of pleasure and comfort, status and wealth, honour and pride. But much more subtle, and more difficult to eradicate, are our inordinate attachments to our preconceived ideas about God, the Church and ourselves. We may hardly be aware of them because they are so much part of ourselves; but they can prevent us from opening our minds and hearts to God. Without being fully con-

---

4 van Büren, Paul: *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London, 1963).

5 Ebeling, Gerhard: *Theology and Proclamation* (London and Philadelphia, 1966), p 91.

6 *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (ed Luis J. Puhl, S.J., Loyola University Press, 1951).

scious that we are doing so, we prefer to keep God at a safe distance. Our preconceived ideas of doctrine in general, and of the doctrine of life after death and resurrection in particular, may constitute such an 'inordinate attachment' and stifle our growth.

Doctrine does not flutter down from heaven ready published in neat sentences. The doctrinal statements of the Church are conceptual expressions of the faith experience of the Church, expressed in the language and thought-categories of their time. They are given to us for our guidance, to help us discern our own experience of God's action in our lives. If we are not trying to live a life of faith, if we are not trying to respond with our lives to the truth that God loves us, then doctrinal statements cannot help us. Doctrine is not the primary object of faith. The God of mystery, the wholly Other, who revealed himself in Christ, is the primary object of faith. Doctrines are means given to us by the Church, to help us understand who he is and who we are; but they are only a means. To consider them as the primary object of faith would be idolatry. Doctrines may be compared to maps, indispensable to the pilgrim in his journey through life, but no use to him if he does not get off his seat and start moving. If in his life he is either sitting still, or moving away from God – attacking his neighbour viciously, for example – he is off the map. Maps are useless to us unless we can locate ourselves on them. That is why 'orthopraxis', that is, trying to find God by being honest, searching for truth and sharing our lives, is the basic constituent of 'orthodoxy'; and why it is so ridiculous when people attack each other viciously in the name of orthodoxy. This is also why the attitude to doctrine in general among so many 'loyal' Catholics, which leads them to accept it unquestioningly and unreflectively, is, in fact, unorthodoxy. If we act in this way we are like lost travellers, afraid to take out the map in case we lose faith in it – a sure sign that we have lost faith in it. To be helped by the map, we have to be on the road, and we need to take our bearings: that is, if the Church's teaching is to be of any help to us, we must be trying to live a life of faith; we must consult our own experience, be in touch with ourselves and reflect on our lives. The importance of this in our attitude to the doctrine of life after death will be discussed later.

Doctrine, too, is presented to us by the Church not as a final answer to our questions. The phrase, *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, has been lifted out of its context and applied to doctrine generally, with disastrous consequences. A doctrine of the Church does not claim to give the complete answer. To continue the map analogy, the func-

tion of doctrine is to keep us from falling over cliffs and getting lost down *cul-de-sacs*. It does not claim to give us a complete description of the route. The doctrine of life after death and resurrection, for example, tells us hardly anything about either; but it does prevent us wandering down the *cul-de-sac* 'death equals annihilation'. Therefore we should look on doctrine not as a threat, the unintelligible *obiter dicta* of a grim headmaster, to be recited daily under threat of expulsion. Rather, doctrine is God's gift to us through the Church. He wants to reveal his love for us and teach us, in the light of it, to love as we are loved. The Church's understanding of who God is, and of her own nature, is a developing understanding. Our individual understanding of who God is, of the meaning of the Church, of our own lives, is equally a developing understanding. In all our learning we learn, or should learn, as much by our mistakes as by our successes. We have to stumble if we are to learn to walk. Doctrine is often presented in such a threatening way that it paralyses us. We are afraid to try walking in case we stumble and become heretics. So we prefer to sit still, which is the greatest heresy of all. The heretic has at least started moving. The trouble is that he insists that stumbling down a *cul-de-sac* is the only way to move.

In sum we should look on doctrine as the gift of a loving God. As the expression of the faith of the Church, it will be intelligible to us only in so far as we are trying to live a life of faith. Our understanding grows and develops. Formulations which helped us to find God, or at least did not cause difficulty at one period of our lives, may become obstacles at a later stage. Many of us in the Church today find that belief in life after death and resurrection, accepted at one stage without difficulty, has now become a doctrine which we prefer not to think about in case we find ourselves denying it.

In the final part of this article I shall give a very brief sketch of some of my own stumblings in trying to understand life after death and resurrection, and of some reflections which I have found helpful. I only hope that they do not lead readers down a *cul-de-sac*.

For a long time I believed in the resurrection as in the other mysteries of the faith because I was brought up a Catholic and saw no reason to deny them. The resurrection, I was taught, was the best attested event in ancient history and it proved Christ's divinity beyond any shadow of doubt. We, too, will rise again with the same bodies at the day of judgment, when we go for all eternity either to heaven or hell. The period between death and resurrection will be spent either in hell, or part or full time in purgatory, or, if we have

been exceptionally good and/or gained the requisite indulgences, in heaven. Then the doubts began to cloud this clear picture. I was unable to imagine what resurrection could possibly feel like; there were problems about cannibals' victims, doubts about the existence of this invisible, intangible, imperceptible, and to me unintelligible entity called the soul, thoughts about the unfairness of indulgences and the gross injustice of hell. Heaven, too, became increasingly unattractive. Saints' lives left the impression of a place populated by austere men and women and some dreadful children whose virtue seemed to lie in the severity of their penances. It was all so far removed from a world where a world-war was being fought. These doubts and misgivings were at one level of consciousness, but there was another level which refused to pay them any attention and knew that God was good. When I became a jesuit and made the thirty-day retreat, I could pray on the events of Christ's life and on his passion, but the resurrection was a disappointment. I prayed St Ignatius's petition, 'To ask for the grace to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and glory of Christ Our Lord', but it never came. The resurrection was an event outside of me and the joy was a forced joy, not to be compared to the joy of seeing my family again or the indefinable longing and hope I could experience by watching the sunset, and reflecting that God is in all things and all things are in him.

When I began to learn a little more about scripture, the doubts increased. I learned that belief in life after death and resurrection of the body was a late development in Judaism. The great patriarchs and prophets had got along without belief in heaven. Then there were the exegetes demythologizing the New Testament. It was like watching the tide come in and demolish my sandcastles. The resurrection sandcastle was untouched for sometime, until I began to look more closely at the New Testament accounts of Christ's appearances after his death and saw how conflicting they really were. The usual explanation of the discrepancies was that the resurrection was such a staggering event that the apostles' confusion was only to be expected. I found this explanation nonsense. The more extraordinary an event, the more likely we are to remember it in vivid detail. The resurrection accounts are not even sure where the appearances took place, whether in Jerusalem or Galilee. According to John, the body was annointed immediately after Christ's death, according to Luke and Mark, it was to be anointed later, in Matthew there was no anointing because the tomb was already sealed. In Mark three

women visit the tomb, in Matthew, two. In Mark and John the tomb is already open, in Matthew an angel moves the stone as the women approach. In Mark there is a young man in dazzling white, in Luke there are two men, and in John the angel is displaced by Christ himself. Luke denies that any women had seen Jesus at the tomb and so contradicts Matthew and John. In Matthew, Christ is already ascended when he appears to the apostles and tells them he will be with them until the end of time. In John the risen Christ confers the Spirit. In Luke the ascension takes place forty days after the resurrection and the holy Spirit is given later. All the witnesses to the resurrection are believers. Not all of them recognize him immediately. It takes two of them a walk and a meal before they recognize with whom they are talking. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, includes his own Damascus vision with the appearances to the apostles, as though in the same category. The tide was well in now, and lapping away at the resurrection sandcastle.

The answer given to all these difficulties was that the gospels are not to be understood simply as factual accounts of Christ's life and words. The gospels are also theological reflections of the early Church on the meaning of Christ, not straight biography.

I could see the truth in this answer and accept it; and it cleared up many difficulties. But it still left the question: When I say, 'I believe in the resurrection of the Body and life everlasting', what am I believing in? What actually happened at Christ's resurrection?

The New Testament accounts make it quite clear that they are not describing the resuscitation of a corpse. John and Luke, for example, emphasize that the disciples did not recognize Christ straightaway. Also Christ comes and goes in the appearances, passing through closed doors in a very non-bodily way. Paul's vision does not mention the body. There are no witnesses of the resurrection event itself, but only of Christ risen. The faith of the Church is not in the empty tomb, a historical fact, in principle verifiable. The faith of the Church is that Christ has overcome death, is risen, is Lord of the Universe. That Christ died is a historical fact. That he rose again and is Lord of all history is not in the same category of events.

The New Testament expresses the faith of the early Church. The resurrection-accounts express and reflect on the apostles' experience of Christ after his death. The apostles proclaimed that unique and mysterious experience in the thought-categories of their world, in the ideas and images which could best approximate to their exper-

ience. No human formulation can ever be adequate to describe the God of mystery, either in himself or in his actions. The apostles experienced Christ in a mysterious way after his death. They expressed that experience in the words, 'God has raised this man Jesus to life. Jesus is both Lord and Christ': this was the content of their message. It was for them the most real event in their lives. Something had happened to them which was not merely subjective. Attempts made to explain away the resurrection in psychological terms, or to reduce it to some inner worldly event, cannot explain the New Testament accounts and the subsequent history of christianity. The apostles' experience of the risen Christ transformed them from being frightened, disillusioned men, into fearless men who proclaimed the resurrection, a message which was to lead most of them to martyrdom. Some who heard them laughed, others thought they were drunk, some believed. Within the hearts of the believers, the apostles' preaching found a resonance. They could accept that Christ was risen again, and in accepting this truth their own lives were changed, and they came closer to God and to their fellow men. For the believers, the apostles' message was not just a piece of information to be learned and repeated on religious occasions. It was a message which brought them new life there and then, transformed their attitudes to wealth, honour, status, and above all to each other, and it gave a new sense of urgency to their lives. They were now on a journey, not to extinction, annihilation, or to flit among the shadows of Sheol, but to meet and be dissolved into the risen Christ.

The same message is preached to us. Does it bring new life and transform us?

If Christ is risen, then it is a truth not simply of the past with future reference beyond the grave; but it is one which must affect us now. 'Be still and know that I am God!' 'Be still and know that I am risen again, that I am with you now, that I am the Lord who has conquered death'. We must be still before this message. We must empty our minds, for the moment, of all our theology, our imaginings, our misconceptions. Listening trustingly, without worrying about ourselves, our faith or lack of it, is all important. For it is in stillness that he can open our eyes, and we can begin to recognize him in the breaking of bread.

'Jesus is Lord'. He has sunk into the depths of our sinfulness, hopelessness and despair, and he is risen again. There is no depth in our life, no situation, no crisis where he is not present. Perhaps, for some of us, it is only in crises that we begin to see what resurrection means.

If we go to meet him, we shall find him. I find those theologians very helpful who emphasize the resurrection as an event which is happening to us now. They have seized on a truth which we have tended to ignore: 'I take the risk of doing what he (Jesus) asks, contrary to all human reason. In the course of so doing I experience the fact: it is true . . . Suddenly, you take the risk again, contrary to all reason, and then again, and yet again. And one day you discover that you are on the path through this life to life'.[7]

Belief in the resurrection is not simply belief in a past event for Christ, and a future event for us. It is a belief, too, about our life at present, that the risen Christ is with us. The truth of the mystery dawns on us in so far as we try to live selflessly, and have times when we try to be still and know that he is with us.

But what about life after death? Are we to interpret resurrection as a way of talking about this present life, face the fact that death means annihilation? The theologians who emphasize the resurrection as a present event have helped to confirm my faith in life after death and resurrection. In trying to be still and let the truth of his resurrection break in, it seems to be truth too good and too great to be fleeting, to end in death and be no more. 'The mountains may crumble and the hills depart, but my love for you remains forever'. Why forever, if we only last for a few years between nothingness and extinction? I cannot imagine life after death or resurrection and do not try to. 'Seek first the kingdom of God' presumably applies to thought about life after death as well as tomorrow's dinner. Paul says, 'We shall be changed. Our present perishable nature must put on imperishability and this mortal nature must put on immortality' (1 Cor 15, 53). It is as though in our lives we are like drops of water, suspended above the ocean, separate, isolated, wanting to be one with it. At death we are dissolved into a new kind of existence, into an at-one-ness with God from whom we came. Yet if there is not some measure of individuality, some identity with our existence now, life after death, described as at-one-ness, becomes annihilation. The New Testament accounts emphasize the identity between Jesus on earth and the risen Jesus. What we do on earth, how we have lived, the friends we have had, our at-one-ness with others and with creation, must bear some relation to our life after death. If heaven is pie in the sky, we are mixing in some of the ingredients now. These thoughts give urgency to life. Von Hügel summed it up well

---

[7] Marxsen, W.: *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1970).

when he said, 'Christians must aim at otherworldliness without fanaticism and this-worldliness without philistinism'.

Finally, another thought which I have found helpful: 'Individuals die within a matter of a few years, and we have no reason to suppose that their life continues beyond the grave'.[8] But what is life this side of the grave? What are these bodies in which we live? We experience them as flesh and blood, but what are they? 'Largely empty space', the scientists tell us: a conglomeration of energy charges. We grow from babyhood through adolescence to the grave. We eat the same food, drink the same drink, breathe the same air, and yet remain our separate, incommunicable selves. I wonder if there are creatures on some other planet, who are totally different from ourselves, and who have heard rumours of man. Perhaps their theologians have had seminars on us and produced a consensus paper: 'Literally conceived, the idea of man has no place, makes no sense and is inconsistent within the framework of our contemporary world picture'. As one writer puts it: 'Christian apologetics would do better to draw attention to the absurdity of suggesting that our bodies are material now, than to try to defend the position that they will be material then'.[9] Resurrection becomes less improbable the more we reflect on the improbability of our present existence.

Our belief in resurrection does not take away our fear of death or desire to live. It makes this life all the more important and precious. Christ was afraid of death. We do not have to be braver. But it is fear in hope, fear of birth into a new life. And our life is a rehearsal for this new birth through death. We have a solemn rehearsal at every Mass when we give ourselves to the Father in Christ. 'Take and eat, this is my Body, given for you. Do this in commemoration of me'. If we try to do the same in memory of him and see our lives as a gift to be given so that others may live, then he gives us some glimmer of his goodness and leads us on to hope for our final birth into a life where the bonds which enclose us now in space and time are broken, and we shall be at one with him in whom all creation has its being.

---

[8] Kaufman, G.: *Systematic Theology: a Historicist Perspective* (New York, 1968), p 464.
[9] Dahl, M. E.: *Resurrection of the Body* (London, 1962), p 91.