

# THE RESURRECTION NARRATIVES TODAY

By PAUL EDWARDS

AT THE AGE of sixteen I tried to tell my father that Easter Sunday was a greater feast than Christmas Day. Never in my later decades of teaching and preaching was I to encounter greater incredulity. I might just as well have told him that I had been promised the reversion of the papacy. Easter, in my father's mind, could never begin to rank with Christmastide, and in this he was typical of the lay Catholics of his generation. Even when we came to Holy Week itself, it was Good Friday that counted for them. On Good Friday afternoon the Church was packed for Stations of the Cross. On Holy Saturday morning the elaborate Paschal ceremonies, beginning commonly at 7.00 a.m., took place in the presence of the usual handful of devout seven-o'clock Mass-goers, a bit dismayed at the length of time it was all taking, and vaguely recalling that Mass had also been a long affair last Holy Saturday. The laity's lack of appreciation of Paschaltide only reflected a far less venial failure among the theologically educated. In my thirties I heard a prominent English Jesuit state that whereas the emphasis in the Eastern liturgies might be on the Resurrection, in the Latin liturgy the stress was on the Passion of Our Lord. The next day an exasperated fellow student sat in my room with a Latin missal on his knee, pointing out to me how every reference to the Passion was immediately followed by a reference to the Resurrection, this being true even of the collect for Maundy Thursday. The mind of our highly intelligent and well-read senior was so focussed on the Passion, so blinkered by his devotion to it, that he had simply not averted to the constant association with the Resurrection.

At that period there were two British Jesuits who were regarded as outstanding givers of the Exercises. Of both it was said that they were 'no good in the Fourth Week'. This, of course, was in the era of the preached retreat. These men handled the logic of the Foundation and the First Week forcefully and penetratingly; they dealt with the Kingdom and the Two Standards with both

eloquence and realism, their commentaries on the Passion were very moving and yet sensibly restrained, and the Fourth Week was a dull uninspiring anti-climax. Since then we have seen what I might well call a 'resurrection of the Resurrection'. The Holy Week ceremonies have been reorganized, and we have all become aware that the stone which the preachers had forgotten how to handle is the cornerstone of our whole religious edifice. It would now be doubly shameful should it be said of those who concern themselves with the exposition of the Exercises that they were 'no good in the Fourth Week'.

Yet the fledgling director, eager that the exercitant 'be glad and rejoice intently' in the Resurrection story, may find himself or herself suddenly at a loss for material. Ignatius is not at all helpful at this stage. He sets out as model a single contemplation: The Apparition of Christ Our Lord to Our Lady, about which he makes two points. The first: 'to consider the divinity, which seemed to hide itself during the Passion, now appearing and manifesting itself so miraculously'. The second: 'Consider the office of consoler which Our Lord exercises, and compare it with the way in which friends are wont to console each other'. Then Ignatius blithely adds, 'In the subsequent contemplations all the mysteries from the Resurrection to the Ascension inclusive are to be gone through'. He offers us no help with them. Look them up in *The Mysteries of the Life of Our Lord* (Exx 300-312), and you will find after each scripture reference a bare grudging precis of 'the history'. The ultimate in brevity he achieves in 'The Eleventh Apparition' (Exx 309, 1 Cor 15,7). 'After that he appeared to James'. And not a single syllable more for our direction, encouragement or edification! Where now the vibrant appeal of *The Kingdom*, the vehemence and the drama of the *Two Standards*? Ignatius seems to have an almost complacent confidence in himself as a pedagogue. He is taking it for granted that by this stage of the Exercises he has taught us so much, imparted so much of experience and technique, that he no longer needs to set out our meditations for us. He simply announces the order of the courses, indicates where in the larder the food can be found and leaves it to us to prepare, cook, eat and digest.

Modern directors may well feel quite incapable of such masterly insouciance, and consider it their duty, if they are to prescribe Resurrection texts for the exercitant's contemplation, to reinforce first of all their own understanding of the texts by studying the

biblical commentaries. Here, if they are not already conversant with the work of modern exegetes, they may be in for a shock. While the theologians and liturgists have been rediscovering and reinstating the mystery of the Resurrection, the event of the Resurrection itself, and the lesser events surrounding it, appear in the hands of some exegetes to have become insubstantial to the point of evanescence. I have listened to a lecturer explaining that the demoralized disciples, continuing to meet in Galilee whither they had fled, came to realize by degrees that their minds were still being influenced by Jesus, and that this communal recognition constitutes the Resurrection. In which case, it seems to me, my father was quite right to focus his devotion on Christmastide. Catholic commentators are usually less extreme, but will, as is their professional duty, indicate the very great difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of taking the scripture texts literally. They point out that Jesus's final address differs in the different gospels according to the key themes of the individual author, that the universal mission, so explicit in Matthew and Luke, seems wholly absent from the consciousness of the Church of the first few years, that the Jewish authorities in Matthew remember Jesus's predictions of the Resurrection quite clearly, when his closest followers seem to have forgotten them entirely. How is one to reconcile the Galilee tradition ('Tell my brethren to go to Galilee'), with the Jerusalem tradition ('Stay in the city'), or harmonize the gift of the Spirit on Resurrection day in John, with the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost in the Acts? Luke's gospel compresses all relevant events into a single day ending with an ascension from Bethany, whereas his Acts describe the risen Lord 'appearing to them during forty days' before the Ascension. The more carefully the commentators compare the Resurrection narratives, the more patent it becomes that we can accept very little of the material at face value.

Ignatius understood the acts of the Apostles to say that Our Lord ascended from Mount Olivet, and he was prepared to accept its testimony entirely at face value. On the eve of his very reluctant departure from the Holy Land he 'felt quite a strong desire to visit Mount Olivet again before leaving'. He made his way thither quite alone, although he knew it to be highly dangerous to move about without a Moslem guide. At the traditional site he bribed the guards with his penknife to let him enter and venerate the stone from which it was believed Christ had ascended, and on

which he had left the imprints of his feet. Having prayed 'with deep consolation', Ignatius then took the road towards Bethphage, only to be brought up short by the realization that 'he had not clearly noticed on Mount Olivet in what direction the right foot pointed, nor in what direction the left'. He immediately turned back, knowingly incurring the same considerable risks all over again, this time parting with his scissors to regain admission to the stone. Can you imagine yourself explaining to such a man that in the New Testament, Galilee and Jerusalem are merely theological designations employed by Matthew and Luke for purely pedagogical ends?

When it was a matter of the life of Our Lord, Ignatius obviously put a very high value on accurate, concrete, objective knowledge. He thought he was getting it on Mount Olivet. He took it for granted in the gospels. What did he do when it was not available? You can watch him doing without it in the first contemplation of the Fourth Week. Leaving aside the initial problem that the incident is in none of the gospels, and Ignatius's placid solution ('Scripture supposes that we have understanding'), see what he asks of the exercitant in the second prelude. 'Here it will be to see the arrangement of the holy sepulchre, and the place or house of Our Lady. I will note its different parts, and also her room, her oratory etc'. And whom am I to bribe with penknife or scissors to find out what kind of house Mary was living in at this point, and what its internal arrangements might be? I am particularly interested in 'her room, her oratory'. Would a carpenter's widow in Loyola or Manresa in Ignatius's own day have had a room of her own, and particularly one with an oratory? I suspect that Ignatius, who had dedicated himself as a spiritual knight-errant before Mary's altar, cannot think of her except in courtly terms, cannot imagine her except with the background proper to a noble lady, and feels entirely justified in providing her with such a background in his contemplation, while knowing full well that she never had it.

When, in this same contemplation of The Apparition of Christ to Our Lady, we come to the first, second and third points, he refers us back to the contemplation on the Last Supper, where he bids us 'see the persons at the Supper', 'listen to their conversation', 'see what they are doing' and in all three cases to 'draw some fruit'. As we have four accounts of the Last Supper we are not short of material for that contemplation. We can imagine the

things being done which the evangelists say were done, the things being said which they tell us were said by Jesus and the Twelve on that occasion. Of the visit of the Risen Christ to his mother we have no such account. If we want to see the scene we must create it from our own imagination or someone else's. We must write our own scenario, compose the dialogue ourselves. In fact, by the time we have reached the Fourth Week we should be quite experienced in doing so. In the contemplation on the Nativity we were asked to imagine the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem . . . 'its length, its breadth; whether level or through valleys and over hills'. As Ignatius did not, I take it, issue contour maps of Palestine to his exercitants, he can only expect us to invent, as we have also to invent a dialogue for Mary and Joseph in the cave, writing in an occasional line for the ox-girl, and perhaps even a few words for oneself as 'a poor little unworthy slave'. We need to be similarly 'creative' for the journey of Our Lord from Nazareth to the River Jordan, for the 'way from Bethany to Jerusalem, whether narrow or broad, whether level etc' and for the actual supper room 'whether great or small, whether of this or that appearance'.

Ignatius may set a high value on accurate, concrete knowledge, or what he took for such. At the same time he is not the least put out at not having it. Would I be justified in saying with regard to the contemplation discussed above, that he was cheerfully content to make it up? The interesting aspect of the matter, as far as I am concerned, is that he tells us to 'draw some fruit'. If I have composed a dialogue between Mary and Joseph in the cave, or between Mary and Jesus in her 'oratory', am I going to 'draw some fruit' from contemplating something that I have composed myself? Can I possibly learn anything, when, unless I already knew it, it would not be there in the dialogue? Or does Ignatius expect that something, of which I was only implicitly aware at the start, will become unavoidably clear in the course of this creative/contemplative exercise? Or is he hopeful that if I make the exercise in the right disposition that I shall receive inspiration in some sense of that word? Also, if I am to 'draw fruit' from watching the actions which I have attributed to the sacred characters, and from listening to the words which I have put into their mouths, then those actions, those words, must be appropriate, must be good and salutary, must be conducive to the grace which Ignatius wishes me to receive in this context. Then what is the check, the criterion? Where is the guarantee? Is it the exercitant's own

orthodoxy? Or the relevant knowledge, judgment and experience of the director? Or is Ignatius quietly, tacitly confident that an exercitant with all the right dispositions will be prompted and guided by a much higher authority?

Am I wrong then in seeing a real parallel between the evangelist creating scene and dialogue and Ignatius's exercitant doing likewise? Neither imagination is working at random; neither set of choices is in any way arbitrary. Both are governed by a sincere unself-regarding wish to express an objective truth in an appropriate and stimulating form. Is the word 'inspiration', used of the evangelist, entirely without application to the exercitant? Of course, the inspiration of the evangelist is of such a quality that the essential truth which he has set himself to communicate comes to us divinely guaranteed. An exercitant, on the other hand, could be foolish, confused, inaccurate, even irresponsible in the use of his or her imagination. Yet does not Ignatius seem to assume that if the exercitants are orthodox in outlook, open to the director's guidance, humbly and sincerely seeking to learn, then they will be led through the medium of their own creative imagination to new and valuable insights? And does not the common experience of directors validate that assurance?

Because so much of the setting and detail of the Resurrection appearances in the gospel accounts has been consciously chosen by the evangelist, they do not for that reason become unimportant. Perhaps the contrary. If the evangelist has chosen the location, exercised a certain selection with regard to the *dramatis personae* and created much of the dialogue, he has made his choices, inspired choices, with a pedagogical purpose. It is important for us to grasp the didactic thrust of each choice. Why does Luke focus exclusively on Jerusalem? Why does Matthew stage the Lord's last appearance on a mountain? Why does Luke insist that he ate, John that he was tangible? The director must never, of course, allow direction to turn into a tutorial in exegesis. Yet the deeper the director's own sense of the text, the more sensitive the choice of text is likely to be, and the better fitted he or she to offer a brief, clarificatory comment or a judicious hint as to where 'the fruit' hangs heaviest.

It is only recently that I have come to realize through perusing certain non-harmonizing studies of the Resurrection narratives, how very much my thinking has been dominated by Luke's chronology in the Acts. There he describes the risen Jesus as 'appearing to them during forty days', then being 'lifted up', with

the descent of the Spirit occurring ten days later at Pentecost. This framework is now enshrined in our liturgical year, and thereby indelibly impressed on us. It can be quite a shock to realize that the same Luke has in his gospel described the Ascension as taking place on the same day as the Resurrection. Theophilus presumably digested this howling discrepancy without raising an urbane eyebrow. To me it demonstrates the extraordinary freedom with which these accounts are framed; freedom, that is, with regard to brute facts of time and place, these being entirely subordinate to catechetical ends to which the writers are consistently, even ruthlessly, faithful. John differs from Luke's Acts in seeming to place the gift of the Spirit on Easter Day itself. He differs from Acts and Luke's gospel in having no Ascension scene at all. Matthew does not need one. His Risen Lord seems to be an already exalted Lord—'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'—who is making a brief reappearance here below.

Luke's Risen Lord, on the other hand, is, as it were, in transit, in an intermediate state between the grave from which he has risen and the heaven to which he has not yet ascended. Yet in the Acts Luke has Peter speaking in Matthean terms, as though the resurrection of Jesus is followed immediately by his exaltation and glorification. In fact, Peter so speaks both on Pentecost Day and at his first appearance before the Council. Indeed, even in his gospel Luke has the risen Jesus saying on the road to Emmaus, 'Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' as though the Resurrection and glorification are to be identified. This actually seems to be the predominant view of the New Testament; it is common to Matthew, the Pauline Letters, to Peter, while in Johannine theology Jesus is already entering into his glory as he hangs from the cross. (John 20,17: 'I have not yet ascended to the Father' would seem to chime with Luke's presentation of a Jesus in transition. Exegetes such as Leon-Dufour and Raymond Brown demonstrate that it does not, but their demonstrations are not for the present context sufficiently compressible.) Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians makes no distinction between Christ's appearance shortly after his death and that to himself many years later. He certainly does not conceive of the first appearances as being of a 'not-yet-ascended' Christ and that to himself as being of quite a different order.

One clear difference there certainly was between his experience and that of the other witnesses he lists to the Corinthians. The

early witnesses were able, though often after notable hesitation, to identify the Risen Lord with the Master with whom they had been familiar during his life. Paul, who seems not to have known Jesus before the crucifixion was not in a position to make that identification. Neither can we identify the Christ we encounter in the Exercises with any experience of the Galilean carpenter turned rabbi, as we did not experience him during his earthly life. At the same time, the understanding of the Resurrection narratives offered by more modern exegesis seems to me to reduce the gap between the experience of those first privileged witnesses and ourselves. For instance, if the gospel witnesses saw a Jesus *not* in an unascended intermediate stage as in Luke's 'forty days', but as one who was already exalted and glorified with the Father, but allowing himself to be seen again on earth, that is one difference the less between their experience and ours. Again, if we are to take the geographical settings as pedagogical devices rather than as historical facts, and to see the emphasis in Luke and John on the tangible presence—'handle me and see' and 'come and have breakfast'—as a didactic medium rather than a literal assertion, the gap shrinks even further.

Nor is it a matter merely of reducing the differences. Analysis of the structure of the Resurrection narratives brings out certain positive similarities between the experience of the gospel witnesses and the exercitant's experience of encountering Christ in the retreat. Three fairly constant elements in the Resurrection narratives are: (1) the initiative wholly that of Christ and commonly accompanied by an element of the unexpected; (2) the recognition by the witness, frequently with hesitation, that the visitant is to be identified with the Master they had previously followed; (3) a mission conferred by him. It may seem a little strange to say that in the Exercises the initiative is with Christ, when the exercitant has chosen to make the Exercises, has selected or consented to a subject for meditation and is deliberately entering into the prayer. Yet I do not think that anyone who has followed the Exercises would disagree that the initiative remains quite obviously with Christ, the encounter with Christ being wholly outside the exercitant's control. Expectations are often disappointed; they may be transformed or transcended. Christ will not be programmed by our preparations, nor confined within our anticipation. Hence there may well be hesitation on our part to identify readily and wholeheartedly the Lord of the unexpected with the Lord of



our past, our sincere following of whom has been mixed with preconceptions and misconceptions which we realize we must now correct.

In most of the Resurrection scenes the astonished women, the flabbergasted disciples are given very little time to digest their experience, but are crisply directed to focus their minds and activities in quite another direction; for example 'Go and tell my brethren', 'Go therefore and make disciples . . . ' and 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'. Of the Spiritual Exercises it has been said that they are inconclusive. So they are, for they do not contain their own conclusion. They are a beginning, a taking of direction, a choosing of routes. The Risen Lord does not manifest himself either to those first witnesses or to the exercitant to round anything off, to provide any sort of grand finale. He is transiently present to heal the past and to confer responsibility for the future. Easter Sunday has no hint of sabbath repose. It is the first day of the week, a beginning.