

16th April 2017 Easter Sunday

Matthew 28.1-20

There's been the suggestion that the story of the man forcibly evicted from a United Airlines plane was staged by a rival air company to cause bad press. Another example of fake news.

It was suggested that another way to evict someone from a plane was democratically ask all the passengers who to throw off. In which case the fat sweaty boke who takes up two seats and spends too long in the toilet is a goner!

In this last year we have had the phenomenon of fake news and post truth. Stories that are not true, or too good to be true but which people take as if they were true. I have come across some fake stories in a Christian context: New translation of the Book of Revelation to include a chapter on the Brexit vote. The God Delusion books withdrawn from sale following Richard Dawkins Conversion! NASA Satellites reveal Jesus is on his way. Second Coming scheduled for next Tuesday.

In the world of politics we know President Trump is a spinner of fake news and also a denouncer of fake news or rather news he doesn't like. But others are at it to. President Assad of Syria saying it was fake news about the

chemical weapons attack on a rebel held town the other week. All made up he claimed. You don't know who to believe?

You don't know what is truth, what is real anymore.

If only the alarm at possible war between North Korea and the US was fake news.

40% of adults in Britain believe that Jesus was not an historical figure.

A quarter of people who describe themselves as Christians in Great Britain do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, a survey commissioned by the BBC suggests.

However, almost one in 10 people of no religion say they do believe the Easter story, but it has "some content that should not be taken literally".

Reverend Dr Lorraine Cavanagh promotes liberal Christian theology.

She said: 'An adult faith requires that it be constantly questioned, constantly re-interpreted. "Science, but also intellectual and philosophical thought has progressed. It has a trickle-down effect on just about everybody's lives. "So to ask an adult to believe in the resurrection the way they did when they were at Sunday school simply won't do

and that's true of much of the key elements of the Christian faith."

Respondents were split evenly on the issue of life after death. While the majority of Christians say they do believe, just 46% of the general public do and 46% do not. The remaining 8% say they do not know and don't care.

Professor Linda Woodhead, said: "This polling confirms that Britain is now split down the middle between those who call themselves Christian and those who say no religion, but this is not a simple division between religious and secular.

"A significant proportion of Christians don't believe in life after death and a significant number of the non-religious do. Belief in a soul and an afterlife persists, including amongst young people, even though belief in the resurrection of Christ and the authority of the Church and the Bible are in decline."ⁱ

Well we are not going to do a poll this morning. One contentious ballot is more than enough for one year in the life of a church. What if all truth was decided on a hand count? You can laugh, but all anthropologists know that people generally believe whatever they think everyone else believes. If they sense that atheism is cool and fashionable then people become atheists and vice versa.

The other day I read the testimonies of a couple of sceptics who found faith.ⁱⁱ Jennifer Fulwiler was raised in a non-religious family and on a diet of science reason and evidence based rational thought. For her all the evidence of natural laws confirmed we live in a material universe of matter, molecules, electrons and protons, with no need for God. She remained a happy atheist as adult until her early years of marriage. Then she gave birth to her first child. She looked at her baby and in her own words "I looked down and thought: 'What is this baby?' And I thought 'Well, from a pure atheist, materialist perspective he is a randomly evolved collection of chemical reactions.' And I realized if that's true then all the love that I feel for him is nothing more than chemical reactions in our brain. And I looked down at him and I thought: 'That's not true. It's not the truth.'"

This moment was a turning point for the young mother. She embarked on a quest to see if religion made sense and started to look into spiritualism, Buddhism, Hinduism and mysticism. The only religion that was off the table was Christianity – her parents had done a thorough job in ensuring Jennifer regarded it as patently false. Eventually her husband (also a non-believer at the time) persuaded her to look into the claims of Christianity. After all, if it was false, it should be easy to dismiss. However, her

investigations led Jennifer to conclude that Jesus really was who he said he was and she wrote a book about it. (*Something Other Than God* (Ignatius Press)).

Jennifer's change of mind began when something clicked in her head. The scientific explanations she had grown up with weren't enough to explain the totality of what she was experiencing in the bond with her child. In the end, even those who believe the world is governed by physical laws find it difficult to believe that love is merely an illusion. 1 John 4:8 states that "God is love". For Jennifer Fulwiler alike, only the existence of God could make sense of her deep-seated belief in love.

Leah Libresco was a mathematician and self-described "geeky atheist" But something called 'the moral argument' had niggled away at Leah for years.

She couldn't shake the belief that some things are really right and wrong, not just a product of her feelings and cultural preferences. Just as she recognised the reality of a mathematical realm that existed independently of us humans, so she had to admit the reality of a moral realm of good and evil. The moral truth that abusing children is wrong is true in the same way that two plus two equals four. But such beliefs about right and wrong made no sense in her atheistic worldview where morality, if it

existed, was purely subjective – something that humans had evolved for social advantage. Her growing belief that morality is a fixed and objective reality only made sense if there was a God.

Her conversion to Christianity caused a backlash from the atheist community. Another atheist Hemant Mehta couldn't comprehend what it was about the moral argument that had possessed her to become a Christian, especially in a world in which her God allowed such evil and suffering to exist.

Like Mehta, CS Lewis objected to God on the basis of the evil he saw in the world, but his conversion mirrored that of Leah's as he realised that his objection only made sense if a moral realm existed: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust?"

We are in battle for truth in our society. What is fake and what is real?

We have been following Matthew's account of the Passion of Christ throughout Lent and now we come to the final instalment – the account of the resurrection. The central

claim of the early church was that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. The central claim was not that he was a great teacher, a powerful healer, an inspiring leader, or that he was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice – no matter how many academic and fictional writers try to rewrite history in their portrayal of Jesus. The crucial fact that the first Christians believed, was that Jesus had been bodily raised to life after being well and truly dead and buried. This is what they announced to a startled world, the world of the Jews and the Gentiles.

And of course people laughed at them and offered alternative explanations. He wasn't really dead, they said. Or maybe the disciples stole the body. Or maybe someone else did. Or perhaps the women went to the wrong tomb. These were all stock answers to the Christian claim and we may suppose that stock responses were soon developed.

Matthew deals with some in his account of the resurrection. His is the only account of the resurrection that includes the details of how the authorities put a guard on the tomb because they wanted to quash rumours of Jesus being raised from the dead. A seal was put on the outside of the tomb. After the resurrection happens Matthew is the only gospel that reports how the authorities tried to control the news and spin fake news about what

had happened. They bribe the guards to say that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus.

None of this of course proves that the Christian story is true. From the very beginning there has been room for doubt, and many have taken that option. Next week I'll preach on the king of Doubt: Thomas and how doubt has an honourable place in the life of faith and can be good at times.

But Matthew is concerned that the doubt be located in the right place. There was no confusion about the details of burial. If you are going to doubt whether Jesus was raised from the dead it must be because you doubt whether the living God could or would do such a thing for Jesus, the Messiah, the one on whose shoulders rested the weight of the world's salvation. That is what is at stake.

Take away the resurrection of Jesus though, and you leave Matthew without a gospel. The cross is the climax of his story, but it only makes the sense it does as the cross of one who was then raised from the dead.

Don't be fooled by the idea that modern science has disproved the resurrection of Jesus. Modern science has done no such thing. Everybody in the ancient world, just like everybody in the modern world, knew perfectly well that dead people don't get resurrected. It doesn't take

Einstein to prove that; just universal observation of universal facts.

The Christian belief is not that some people sometimes get raised from the dead, and that Jesus happens to be one of them. It is precisely that people don't ever get raised from the dead, and that something new has happened in and through Jesus which has blown a hole through previous observations.

The Christian thus agrees with scientists ancient and modern: yes, dead people don't rise. But the Christian goes on to say that something new and different has now occurred in the case of Jesus. This isn't because there was an odd glitch in the cosmos, or something peculiar about the biochemistry of Jesus, but because God who made the world, and who called Israel to be the bearer of his rescue mission for the world, was at work in and through Jesus to remake the world. The resurrection was the dramatic launching of this project.

It isn't difficult to understand the mixture of terror and delight that gripped the women who had gone to the tomb that morning.

Matthew's graveside scene is easily the most dramatic of the four gospels: an earthquake, an angel, the guards stunned into a swoon, and messages about Jesus going on

ahead to Galilee. Some think, of course that Matthew added some of these details to make things appear more spectacular; you might just as well say that the others missed them out because if you're telling a story like this you don't want people to laugh at the details and then think they've dismissed the event itself. The point, of course, is that what is happening is the action of God himself and it is literally earth shattering, more powerful than the mother of all bombs.

The God who remained silent on Good Friday is having the last word. Jesus, his way and his claims are vindicated. He is the victorious one.

Our secular and scientific world view wants to resist the news of Jesus' resurrection every bit as much as the chief priests did. They want to preserve their own status quo intact against the radical disruption that would otherwise occur. Some just hope that death is the end, though they need as much faith to believe that as we need faith to believe it isn't. Some are worried that a belief in resurrection will give you courage to stand up against injustice. Death was always the favoured tactic of tyrants who threatened people's lives unless they did as they were told. Fear has always been the instrument of choice for the bullies of this world.

Last weekend on Palm Sunday there was a deadly double-bombing at Egyptian churches, and 46 Christians lost their lives to Islamist violence. Caskets marked with the word "martyr" were brought into the Mar Amina church in Alexandria as mourners carried flowers in a procession to the beat of snare drums this week at the mass funerals of some of those who had lost their lives. .

Andrew Boyd, a spokesperson for the Christian organisation Release International which supports believers under pressure for their faith, said the Egyptian Church is growing, despite persecution.

He said: "There is something of a revival going on within the Coptic Church and that's been a response to the direct violent persecution. Church attendance, according to some commentators is doubling and even trebling. Maybe that is why they are being attacked?"

St Paul wrote about the consequences of a belief in the resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians:

‘Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?’

.....⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Those Coptic Christians have been threatened with bombs today if they turn up to churches to celebrate the resurrection. What great courage and death defying faith will those Coptic Christians witness to right now thousands of miles away. God bless them and protect them.

Though the angel tells the women that the disciples are to go to Galilee and see Jesus there, they meet him almost at once there near the tomb. The disciples must see Jesus, but that seeing will be a commissioning, a commissioning to a new work, a new life, a new way of life in which everything he told them before will start to come true.

We cannot today meet Jesus in the way the women did that morning. The danger is that we keep the resurrection in history – back in the past. The angel said to the women – he is not here he has been raised and he’s gone on ahead of you’. Why linger at the tomb when the Lord is at the heart of our living? The gospel account is all that is necessary to link us with those times, with those events, but the focus of the gospel account is not on the past,

otherwise it could not be 'good news.' Never mind allegations of fake news. It would be yesterday's news. The focus is on good news: the splendour, the majesty and the compassion of the risen Christ, the one who is with us always.

It is vital to Christian belief and experience that we can and should meet Jesus in spirit and get to know him as we worship him and learn from him. That personal and intimate relationship with the living Lord is central to what being a Christian means in practice. It gives you hope in all circumstances.

In this gospel Matthew intends to write of something that had actually happened, something that not only changed women's hearts but had torn a hole in normal human history. This event changed the world for ever. It announced, not as a theory but as a fact, that God's kingdom had come, that the son of man had been vindicated after his suffering and there was the start of God's new age that would continue until the end of time.

I thank God for the blessings of faith and the resurrection of Christ. My mother died on Thursday. She died in her sleep sometime during the night. As you know we have been expecting this outcome for some time now. My mother defied predictions and lived a further four months

after only being given a few days back at the start of January. I'm grateful to God for having had some precious times with her in recent months despite her dementia, and I had been praying for her to die peacefully in her sleep so was strangely relieved to hear the news.

It's a privilege to be a minister of the Gospel of the Risen Lord. Poignant that this has happened at the Easter weekend in which we proclaim our faith: 'where O death is your victory where o death is your sting: God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'. My mother had a simple faith that I know helped mine. She never doubted the resurrection. She always took things on trust. Although she's now dead, she is now more alive than she has ever been.

May you continue to know that the Lord is with you always, to the end of time and that nothing, not even death can separate you from his love.

Alleluia Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed, alleluia!

ⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-39153121>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2017/April-2017/When-sceptics-convert-3-former-atheists-walking-the-path-of-CS-Lewis>