

**The Bishop of St Albans  
Easter Sunday Sermon,  
Matins: 31 March 2013  
Romans 6: 4**

Resurrection is not just a doctrine to which we assent with our minds; it is a reality to be experienced here and now. It is precisely that point that St Paul was making in that reading from Romans 6 which we have just heard: *We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life.* As Christ hung on the cross with outstretched arms, he was summoning us to life.

Like hundreds of thousands of other people, I've just been to see the newly released film of *Les Misérables* based on Victor Hugo's great novel. Jean Valjean, a convicted criminal is out on parole. Hugo says of him: 'Hatred was his only weapon and he resolved to sharpen it in prison and carry it with him when he left'.

One evening Valjean goes to a bishop's house in exhaustion and desperation seeking help and shelter. The kindly bishop gladly takes him in and they eat together. As he does so Valjean notes the glittering silver cutlery. That night he goes to sleep in a real bed between clean sheets for the first time for many years. Early the next morning he rises very early but he cannot resist the temptation and he stuffs the silver cutlery in his knapsack and runs away.

Later Valjean is captured and brought back by the gendarmes. The bishop is asked to identify both the silver and the criminal. He feigns surprise at the capture and says: 'Yes, certainly Valjean was here as my guest last night and indeed I gave him the silver. 'But', he says, turning to the convict, 'Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest and worth a good two hundred francs. Did you forget to take them?'

Valjean is released and after the gendarmes had left, confused and puzzled, the bishop says turns to the convict: 'Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to what is evil but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God'. This encounter is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of 'resurrection love' outside the New Testament, something which sets Valjean on his way to redemption and wholeness. It is this extraordinary love which reaches out to the undeserving, to the unlovely, and awakens a response that is the defining element in the entire story of *Les Misérables*. It is the first step of him being raised to new life.

Later on, in turn, Jean Valjean saves the life of the student Marius. He becomes a life-giver. That act of undeserved love has prised open a door in Valjean's soul. He experiences resurrection.

And if that is what is at the heart of the Easter message, it is a reminder that this is the task which has been entrusted to us, his people, the church. To be a people who bring life through death, to be a resurrection people. Not just to proclaim a doctrine of resurrection, but to live a life of resurrection.

In the New Testament we find two words for 'life'. *Bios*, from which we get the word 'biology', which means life or existence – it's about breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping. And then there is also the word *zoe*. It's a word meaning energy, or animation, or vibrant living. It's the word that Jesus uses in John 10.10 Jesus uses in John 10.10: 'I came that you –

together - might have life, life in abundance'. It's the same word – zoe – here in Romans 6: *so we too might walk in newness of life.*

In his never-ending love God invites us to enter upon a life-transforming journey in the company of his Son, Jesus Christ. He doesn't want us simply to exist as human beings, vegetating our way month by month until our demise. He wants us to be vibrant, energized men and women, realizing the full potential which he has planted within us and which is brought to life by the divine love. And of this Jesus Christ is both the Way and the role-model, and the Holy Spirit is our enabler. In words from Charles Causely's poem 'Ballad of the Bread Man', Jesus came 'to bring the living to life' - resurrection. Jesus comes to transform our bios into zoe. He summons us into life, summons us to the way of love.

'*So we too might walk in newness of life*'. But we cannot leave it there. There is also a hard edge to this resurrection life which cannot simply be spiritualised. This concrete expression of love was symbolically enacted out in many places on three days ago on Maundy Thursday when in high streets and shopping centres people went out to wash people's feet and in some cases, to clean their shoes. It's why traditionally bishops go into prisons and hospitals and children's homes at the great festivals of Christmas and Easter, to show that God's love is especially for the marginalised, the prisoners, widows and orphans. That's one of the reasons why I and other bishops have been engaged with the Welfare Bill which has been passing through Parliament. Of course, we have been accused of being naïve, although we are all quite realistic that we can't go on spending as if there is not tomorrow. What we have been asking is 'where should the burden of cuts fall?' and it is an important question for many of the most vulnerable people in our society, many with chronic long term illnesses, who are besides themselves with worry about how they are going to manage. This resurrection life is not just about the personal and the private. It is also about social justice and working for a society where all have equal opportunities.

God's love - summoning us to resurrection life - is not just for the privileged but for all. And if we are to truly celebrate the message of resurrection this Easter we will need to love with the love of Christ who gave his life for many. And so to my final quotation – a piece of dense theology from that well known book *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Those of you who are familiar with this children's story will know that it is set in children's nursery and when the children are not there, the animals talk to each other.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." "I suppose *you* are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

*God of Resurrection,  
you raised your Son Jesus Christ from the grave,  
and named him the first-born from the dead:  
we thank you that in baptism we have passed through the waters of death;  
give us grace to walk each day in newness of life  
and seek the things that are above, where Christ is sat at your right hand;  
to Him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.*