

You do hear some unexpected things in churches. I don't mean the rude versions of the hymns the choristers sing when they think we're not listening. Kids, we can hear you. I know you think you're smart, but you just know the vanilla versions... Anyway, not the dubious choral variations: always a surprise to hear, but not on the menu this morning. Nor are we talking about virtuoso swearing that you'll sometimes hear from the clergy because that's not a surprise to anyone. Certainly not in this parish.

What's really surprising is what you might hear in churches if you ask the people who sit in the pews week after week what they actually believe about God, the universe and everything. Now I haven't asked you and don't worry I'm not going to- I might look stupid but I'm not. However many moons ago a church I was then attending in North London decided to run an Alpha Course. When I say 'run an Alpha Course', what they actually did was noticed the blitz of publicity Alpha Central was paying for one year, so did their own thing and called it 'Alpha', keeping the vague structure of the course- feed people, talk to them, let them talk- but junked the content. Win, win, win. Feed, talk, let them talk.

And when people talk, they tell you what they actually believe about God, the universe and everything, and, boy. In any given congregation, pretty much every heresy of the first five hundred years of Christianity will have its adherents; if it's a really tiny country-parish size congregation, people just double up with the odd beliefs. Just one of the many reasons why Alpha won't be coming to a church near this one any time soon.

Pelagianism, passipatrionism, Arianism, KFCchickenism (you're not asleep then) Calvinism. The words probably mean nothing to you, but you probably believe at least one of them. Probably the finger licking good one. You probably believe it but Church says 'no!' The existence of these beliefs hundreds or thousand of years after the Church first said 'no' is not particularly surprising if you think about it. 'Heresies' so-called, are beliefs held by people who are basically people like you and me here today; people who are, like you and me searching for the truth. Obviously apart from those who are not actually here looking for the truth but are here this morning because they've been forced to come or are trying to keep granny happy. Thing is, looking for the truth, we all keep looking in the same places. It's hardly surprising then that we keep making the same mistakes century after century, cos we're all rifling through the same set of drawers year after year and always looking in those same drawers for the same thing. Truth. Except, the search for truth is like walking along a cliff edge... in six inch heels. Obviously I haven't tried it, cliff edge or not- or I

wouldn't be here. But go teetering on the top in sling-backs and it's easy to totter over the edge and before you know it the gentle searcher pilgrim is hurtling towards a sudden impact with Pelagianism, passipatrionism, Arianism and their peculiar pals. It's not really surprising that churchgoers find themselves there. They may be heresies, but they're Christian heresies.

What is a surprise is when a pillar of a North London congregation, a person who's been sat in the same pew for so long that it's moulded itself to the shape of their... faith; when *that* person tells you that Christianity is all about reincarnation.

Reincarnation. Coming back again and again, living life after life after life. You might think this quite an attractive proposition given that many of those who claim to remember their past lives remember being something like a rich merchant, an Aztec princess or Cleopatra. I just think it's odd that nobody ever seems to remember being a cleaner in a previous life. Or a street sweeper. Or unemployed. Or working in a fish canning factory in Grimsby. Or as the lavatory attendant in the public convenience just down the road from the tinned tuna factory. And indeed nobody seems to remember their past life as a fish (canned or fresh) a beetle or a badger or a hare or a slug.

Of course, this is merely a cartoon caricature. Reincarnation is a serious part of some serious world religions. And respect to other faith believers, who, like us, are searching for the truth, just in a different set of drawers. That said, reincarnation is absolutely not a Christian belief. As far as we're concerned it's *resurrection* not reincarnation. Resurrection. It's what today's big celebration is all about. On the third day, Jesus rose again. His resurrection. And the final fate of all of us.

One of the many unsung blessings of the resurrection belief is that, unlike reincarnation, you won't ever get to come back to this world. Ever. And- here's the real cherry on the top- nobody else does either (I hope you're listening Mrs Thatcher. Just stay put.)

In the interests of inclusivity, there is probably a small section of a Venn diagram where it just might be possible to get some resurrection/reincarnation overlap. From what I understand of theories of reincarnation, the process- potentially -is finite. You don't just keep coming back for ever and ever as if you're stuck in an infinite life-loop or trying to get out of the Kingston one-way system. If you're really, really 'good' you don't come back to this world at all: you go to nirvana. Resurrection sounds rather

like that, though a shortened version perhaps, without the need to endlessly keep repeating yourself before heading to eternal bliss.

And you know, maybe the reason nobody can remember their past life as a cleaner is that all the cleaners have swept (if you'll forgive the pun) off to paradise; and the reason that so many people remember being generals or Cleopatra is that the rich, successful, powerful people really never get it first time around, and they keep landing on the snake (or their asp in Cleo's case), the snake that slithers them right back to the starting square and there they go, off again, swirling round the karma of their own making.

Though that last bit sounds rather Christian- rich men and eyes of needles come to mind- this is where we take our departure from reincarnation this morning and discover the real, true joy of what that first Easter morning represents.

Here it is.

It's true that the poor, the excluded, the despised and the persecuted automatically get to the front of the resurrection queue. But there is room in that line for everybody. Yes, the rules of this life are reversed, and the powerful and the privileged no longer hog the priority lane. However, though they may have to wait a little while longer, they get there in the end.

The Christian hope of resurrection is not some sort of revenge fantasy where everybody gets their just desserts and for some that means resurrection bliss and for some the fiery furnace. That might be a satisfying vision on one level, but it doesn't really do any justice at all to the width, and strength and depth of God's love. Truth be told, although at the pearly gates the queuing priority might be the opposite to what it is in this life, when we do get to the front of the line, we will find that none of us, saint or sinner, has the entrance fee. And yet, here is the biggest surprise of all: still, the gates swing open, for each and every one of us.

This is the glorious vision of the resurrection, the golden glow that has enveloped the heart of world since the first Easter Day: that nothing and no-one cannot be redeemed by God. That nothing and nobody is not transformed by the touch of the resurrection. Those who have risen to the challenge. Those who have struggled to get it right. Those who have started ok and then fallen flat on their faces. Those who

from beginning to end have failed miserably to get it right (got to the clergy in the end). All transformed.

The resurrection of Our Lord is a sign and a pledge of God's love: not for Jesus, but for us. Because, for all of us, when this brief life is ended, we won't find ourselves back at the starting gate. When this brief life is ended a hand will reach out grasp us tight and never let go. That hand, still bears the marks of the nails that held it to the Cross. That hand belongs to Jesus, the first born from the dead that first radiant Easter morning, and he comes to take all his brothers and sisters home.