

EASTER DAY

Members of the Jury; you have heard the evidence and the arguments of learned counsel. It is now my task, as the presiding judge, to sum up and to draw attention to the main points to which you should give your careful consideration.

Let me remind you that the issue you have to decide is, 'Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead?' Do not be side-tracked into the lesser question - 'Did his spirit survive death?' That is not the claim of Christianity but of spiritism. The claim of Christianity is that this is a real event; there is a date in human history when a man rose from the dead. If that is not true then the whole of the Christian faith falls to the ground. That is recognised by the Christians themselves for one of their leading exponents, the apostle Paul, writes,

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [1 Cor 15:17]

I must ask you to confine yourselves to the point at issue. Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? We are not discussing whether he even existed. I am aware that some may hold that there was no such person as Jesus Christ, so the question of whether he rose from the dead would not then arise. On that matter I would comment only this: there is a Christian Church today. The Christian Faith is known through the entire world. That is a fact. Its existence can be traced back through history to the period when it began. That also is a fact. The founders or original propagators of the faith have recorded how it all began. If you reject their testimony then you must submit an alternative explanation to account for its beginning, and convince us of the truth of that alternative. To say, "I don't believe it", is not evidence, only an opinion and you must give sound reason for your opinion.

There is ample corroborative evidence that a man named Jesus lived in Judea at the time it is claimed; and that he gathered a large following. So I must ask you to accept that as fact, whether or not you believe the claim that he was the Son of God. What you have to decide is did he rise from the dead?

Now, I would remind you of the assertion of learned Counsel for the prosecution that it was all a deception. First he produced evidence - which you may have found very convincing - that men who were crucified under Roman law would usually take a number of days to die. Indeed, he showed from the Christian Scriptures themselves that Pilate, the Roman Governor, was surprised that Christ had died so quickly (after only six hours) and he sought confirmation that this was the case. Counsel suggested that Christ had fallen into a swoon caused partly by the intense pain he suffered, and partly by the vinegar on a sponge which was passed to him on a reed or stick while he was on the cross, and which had been drugged. The swoon was deep and the centurion was misled into believing that he was dead. Laid in the tomb, the cold revived him and he was eventually able to gather sufficient strength to leave it and return to his followers.

Counsel for the defence refuted this. He pointed out that Jesus had specifically refused to take the drugged vinegar and he referred to the severity of Christ's wounds. He must have lost a lot of blood because of the nails and there was also the spear thrust into his side. The centurion had checked the body; which had been handled also by Joseph of Arimathea and by Nicodemus - neither of whom had noticed that it was a state of swoon rather than death. The reason for the short time which elapsed before Christ died was the additional punishment and strain he had undergone previously. He had been scourged by Pilate in the hope that the people would accept that as sufficient punishment instead of death. Such scourging was so severe that men had been known to die under it without the further suffering of

crucifixion. It seems that he could not carry his own cross, which was the normal custom, because he was too weak. Counsel also asked you to consider whether, if it had been a swoon, any man could get out of the tomb, sealed with a heavy stone, and carry on a conversation with others, without having any medical attention to his wounds which were so serious, especially considering the weakness ensuing upon the loss of blood.

That is the first point you must consider: was Jesus really dead? Because, if he wasn't, then of course there is no question of his rising from the dead.

Counsel for the prosecution then went on to suggest that, assuming it were true that Jesus had died, he did not rise. What then happened to his body? Obviously, someone must have removed it from the tomb. Who? Counsel put forward three possibilities. First, complete strangers - grave robbers. In view of the publicity of this case and the guard of soldiers, this was most unlikely and Counsel himself discounted this as a serious possibility. He did, however, submit that the body could have been taken by two other groups of people.

First, by the Jewish authorities themselves. He quoted from St. Matthew's Gospel that after Christ's death the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and said that they had remembered (and I quote) "that impostor said while he was still alive, 'after three days I will rise again.'" And they asked for a guard of soldiers. You will recall that Counsel suggested that in order to make sure that Christ's followers did not steal the body and then proclaim that he had risen, the Jews themselves stole it.

I would remind you at this point, that Counsel for the defence remarked that if this were so, then, when the disciples made that very claim that Christ had risen, why didn't the Jews produce the body which they had removed and end the matter once and for

all? He claimed that it was because they did not have it. There was no dead body to be produced.

Counsel for the prosecution then put forward the third alternative, which I believe you should consider the most serious of his three suggestions. The body was stolen by the disciples themselves so that, with there being no body, they might claim that Christ had risen.

At this point, you will recall, both learned Counsel made much of the guard of soldiers. Counsel for the defence said that the guard had been set for the very purpose of preventing such a theft. Counsel for the prosecution said that the guard had fallen asleep - this might be reprehensible but it had happened and even scripture itself records this report.

Counsel for the defence stated that for soldiers on guard in the Roman army to sleep on duty would almost certainly be a capital offence; soldiers would never admit to this. Counsel for the prosecution drew attention to the fact that it might well be that the guard was not made up of Roman soldiers. The priests did indeed ask Pilate for a guard but he said, "You have a guard" - the Temple guard; presumably these were the ones who had gone with Judas to Gethsemane in order to capture Jesus. It was these men who fell asleep. Alternatively, if it had been a Roman guard, scripture records that the priests promised that if the Governor, Pontius Pilate, should hear of it, they would speak to him to ensure that no harm came to them. The story that the priests bribed the soldiers was made up by the disciples to explain away the truth.

You will recall that Counsel for the defence remarked that if the guards said, as is reported, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep", if they were asleep how did

they know that was what happened? And if they were awake, it couldn't have happened anyway.

In his final speech, Counsel for the prosecution stated that the disciples were men who had given up their careers to follow the one they believed to be the Messiah. He was a good man with wise teaching, but when he died under such tragic circumstances, they could not abandon all that they had hoped for. So they put around the story he was alive in order to preserve his teaching and encourage others to join the movement.

Counsel for the defence countered this by saying that men may die for an ideal in which they passionately believe, but not for a fraud. These men, the disciples, suffered persecution, imprisonment, stoning, flogging and death, simply because they preached that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. They had only to deny that fact to be spared the suffering - but this they refused to do. If Christ had not risen as they claimed; if they had not seen and spoken with him, why should they continue the charade at such cost of suffering to themselves if they knew it was a lie?

Well there you have it. You must weigh the evidence and make your judgement. The Christian claim is that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead and he is alive now and he lives within those who have put their trust in him. But I would remind you of the remark of Counsel for the prosecution, which I must say I found most powerful, especially since he made it without rancour or hint of sneering. If it is true that Jesus Christ is risen and lives within those who profess his name - why does that not show more clearly in the way that they behave? Why are so many of them so unkind and arrogant and so miserable? Can you really believe that Christ is in them?

On the other hand, you will recall that Counsel for the defence did call a great number of witnesses who claimed that they know Jesus Christ personally. Some of these were men of proven intellect. It wasn't that they claimed they had reasoned their way to faith but, at least, they did not find it unreasonable to have faith. One or two of these witnesses, you will remember, came from what used to be communist countries where they had been imprisoned for their faith. You may feel that, as Counsel for the defence pointed out with regard to the first disciples, these witnesses must be convinced for themselves of the reality of Christ's resurrection, for why else would they be willing to suffer such imprisonment in our own day?

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the question before you is this:- Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead that Sunday morning? Will you now please consider your verdict?