

Sunday 26 April 2009: Third Sunday of Easter

You are witnesses to these things

Readings: Acts 3.12-19; Luke 24.36-48

Rabbi Mark Winer was here on Thursday. Some of you know him. He's one of my best sources of religious jokes and Senior Rabbi at West London Synagogue, a larger than life American who delights to say that he is British, as he now has dual nationality. He and his wife were coming to the St George's Day concert in church. St George, a Palestinian soldier, displaced Edward the Confessor as the Patron Saint of England when those returning from the Crusades brought him home as a popular saint who caught the imagination, though not by helping the cause of inter-faith dialogue.

We met beforehand and had supper in the Café in the Crypt. Mark has been an Adviser to the building renewal project. Seven years ago, in an Arabic restaurant on the Edgware Road he taught me to fundraise: "Never let them pay for the meal", he said. "They will think that taking you out to lunch is their contribution to the project." He has been a constant friend to me and to St Martin's and he and Suellen were delighted to see all that has been achieved.

The Café was packed and we struggled to find a table. "This is a great business", he said. "Is it a Franchise?" "Oh no", I said, "We run it ourselves", a bit too pleased with the thought of the Vicar teaching the Rabbi about running a good business. We found a table. "You say grace", I said. Thank goodness we had salads because hot food would have gone cold. We prayed to God of many names: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; to Jesus; to the God of Mohammed, the Buddha and the Lord Krishna. I have heard him use this dizzying prayer before. At the end he laughed and said he usually gets into trouble if he prays like that but that as he has got older he has become more radical. To acknowledge all the different ways in which the world's great variety of people find God is the only way he can now make sense of this world of faiths.

Over nearly 30 years, this is an area I have made my own but I was out of my comfort zone. I know the experience of others is different and I enjoy being with people of other faiths and praying with them. We have much in common but, whilst I have no interest in religious exclusivism or an introverted Christianity, to belong everywhere you have to belong somewhere, and I know that I meet God fully in Jesus. Confidence in that allows me to be open to the fact that other people are different. Oddly enough it is the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, who has written so compellingly on 'The Dignity of Difference' and how we are incomplete without each other. And it was Rabbi Winer who taught me a long time ago in our friendship that he didn't need me to soft pedal my Christianity to try to accommodate his Judaism. He needed me to be clear about my Christianity so that he could be clearer about his Judaism. He is one of my teachers, a rabbi, and he is one of London's leaders of religious dialogue.

You can hear a similar struggle about the relationship between Christians and Jews in many of the readings for the Easter season, but especially in today's. The incredulity of the disciples to the risen Jesus is explicit. Even after his greeting, "Peace be with you", they were startled and terrified. Luke then says that the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus had taken place according to the scriptures. Jesus is the fulfilment of everything written about the Messiah in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. As in the life and ministry of Jesus, the proclamation

is to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, to our turning around and facing God. Luke says this is for all nations and when he writes, "You are to witness to this" he is not just referring to the disciples.

The passage read today from the Acts of the Apostles shows how the apostles continued the ministry of Jesus. After the healing of a paralysed man, just like Jesus's healing, Peter addressed the Israelites:

"You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made [this man] walk? The God of Abraham... Isaac and ... Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over and rejected....you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead...and [who] by faith in his name....has made this man strong..."

To soften the impact on the Jews and help them out of a corner, Peter continued,

"And now friends, I know that you acted in ignorance.... Repent, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Not surprisingly, just as Jesus had been rejected, the first generation of Christians found themselves separated from the synagogue. The mission from Jerusalem to the wider world meant that Christianity caught fire among Gentiles and the centre of the Western Church became Rome, not Jerusalem.

Nearly 2,000 years later there is more to be said. The risen Christ's greeting to his disciples was, "Peace be with you". We Christians should be ashamed at our inability to make peace and we should be ashamed of the religious dimension of many of the world's conflicts. In our treatment of Jews, Christians have a great deal to repent about and seek forgiveness. By and large, it is better to begin with our own shortcomings than to berate others for theirs. Given the history, friendship and dialogue, the occasional shared meal and invitation to worship seem a better way forward, exploring similarity as well as difference as honestly and creatively as we can. In this urgent process we really need to be pushed beyond our comfort zones.

In the resurrection stories of the Gospels the appearance of the risen Christ are extraordinarily brief. Yet they carry a conviction that a glimpse, a moment, is enough to point us to the glory of God's kingdom and for a faith by which to live. The sense of wonder, surprise and incompleteness should encourage those of us who know we haven't got it all wrapped up. The invitation is to live in the light and life of Christ, and for that to be a commitment to which we witness rather than use as a weapon against others. Early Christians talked about themselves as people who travelled on the way of Jesus Christ, having a dynamic faith not a static possession.

I recently found a letter from the Bishop of London written shortly after he had been here to bless our Heritage Lottery Fund application in January 2003. He had picked up a copy of Carolyn Scott's biography of Dick Sheppard for £2 in a second hand bookshop. The Bishop wrote,

"It was very easy to read and I polished it off last night. I was very struck by some of the things Dick said, not least during his fruitful time at St Martin's..."

I...liked his attack on a 'lethargic church' and his conviction that 'it seems clear that the next revival of religion will not run through the channels of any one denomination but that each Christian Church will be used in proportion as it can respond to a Gospel of upheaval which must surely be the first characteristic of the gale of God'".

St Martin's is one of London's great churches. At long last we are coming through the very large building renewal project, the aims of which were that our buildings would speak well of Christ in the heart of this city, and that the buildings would equip us for service in the twenty first century. There is much to give thanks for at our Annual Meeting today, both from within the life of this community and the extraordinary support we have received from a very wide range of people, including some people of other faiths.

The success of what has been achieved is causing us to grow in numbers and activity. It is giving us greater confidence in a style of Christianity that encourages, "questioning open minded people to discover for themselves the significance of Jesus Christ". This is a place in which a very wide range of people experience a glancing encounter with the risen Christ who says, "Peace be with you". For many people this is a place of new life. It comes in many forms: of rest and healing, of comfort and challenge, of repentance and forgiveness. You are witnesses to these things.

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