

Sunday 4 April 2010: Easter Day

How to portray the resurrection?

Readings: Acts 10.34-43; John 20.1-18

How to portray the resurrection? That's the problem.

In Jerusalem there is a convent on the Via Dolorosa called Ecce Homo. It is built over the pavement on which Pilate tried Jesus, found no fault in him and declared 'Ecce homo', Behold the Man, as he handed Jesus over to be crucified. The convent is nowadays in the Arab Quarter of the old city, near the El Aqsa mosque. It is a wonderful place for the Christian pilgrim to stay but having flown in late from London being woken by the Islamic call to prayer at 4.30 in the morning was not instantly welcomed. Jerusalem, the City of Peace, is one of the noisiest cities in the world, including a lot of religious noise. It presents an endless series of challenges. I was there as a pilgrim so it was good for me to be woken early to pray. I gave up fuming and got out of bed. The Islamic call to prayer could be my call to prayer, too.

An Anglican Franciscan had told me that the church of the Holy Sepulchre is one of the most difficult places on earth to pray. There are famous rivalries between the different Christian factions who look after it and it is over-run by tourists. Brother Bernard had told me that the best time to go was early in the morning just as it opened before the tourists get there and in the evening, just before it closes, when the tourists have gone. It was advice that transformed my stay in Jerusalem. Thus it was that I found myself alone one evening in silent contemplation in what for centuries has been alleged to be the tomb of Christ, the place of resurrection. Suddenly, one of the most awesome moments was interrupted by three monks with scraper, dustpan and brush. They literally trod on me as I knelt on holy ground and they did their job, determined to clear the candle wax and debris of the prayers of that day's pilgrims.

How to portray the resurrection? That is the problem for the Christian Church. This week the novelist Philip Pullman has published a book about 'The good man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ'. Pullman says the Church has corrupted the teachings and person of Jesus by making him into more than and different to what and who he ever was. In this Pullman accuses the Church of wickedness and it's hard to complain when representatives of the Church have trodden on people kneeling on holy ground and, having done so, the institution has protected them.

In the Passion Play in Trafalgar Square on Good Friday, Jesus burst out of the tomb. The soldiers there to guard him ran in fear, and Christ walked among the crowds. He talked with people, waved and smiled, "Peace", before walking towards this church and people clapped the end of the performance. It was flattering, of course, but Philip Pullman's got a point and, thank God, Jesus exists apart from the Church, as well as within it.

A few weeks ago I went to see a lady on her death bed. She was not much of a church go-er but she had been a wonderful wife, mother and local doctor and had been a good friend to me and to St Martin's. With bright eyes she smiled and told me that the one thing she is sure of is that in the end love always wins. Her's was a calm and assured parting from this world. After a week in which we have rehearsed the stories of betrayal, denial and the disciples scattering, the risen Lord meets us and begins to gather us again. The Church's job is to

witness to Christ in the world not to claim sole possession. In the end, love, truth, peace... always win. That is the resurrection.

This morning we have received the third volume, the Psalms, of the St John's Bible. St John's Abbey is a Roman Catholic Benedictine community in Minnesota. For the new millennium they commissioned from Donald Jackson, the Queen's calligrapher, the first hand-written illuminated manuscript of the whole Bible since the Reformation, "To ignite the spiritual imagination for the new millennium with the Word of God". They realised that what was being produced was so good that they printed it and what we are being given is a very beautiful edition, the only one in the UK.

We have already received the books of Prophets and Wisdom of the Old Testament and we have become familiar with some of their images. The Psalms are poetry, composed to be sung. So the illustrations are confined to the frontispiece of five books, the division of the Hebrew Psalter. In the rich colours of each book there are drawings of the temple in which the Psalms were sung. They were the prayer book of Israel and of Jesus, and today the Psalter is the prayer book of the Synagogue and the Church.

The monks in St John's Abbey recite all 150 Psalms each week. Some Psalms are penitential and laments, others songs of joy. All human life is there; and all are sacred songs.

The Scribe overseeing this project, Donald Jackson, wondered if it would be possible to use sound as a visual image. They did so by generating graphs from an oscilloscope, turning sound into lines. Those going horizontally across the page represent traditional Plainsong notation and the monks in St John's Abbey reciting the Psalms. The vertical graphs are of other sacred songs, Greek Orthodox Christian and Hebrew singing of Psalms, a Taoist bell, a Native American chant and an Islamic call to prayer as well as. The sound of sacred song never stops. That is resurrection, finding that of God in all things.

In John's Gospel that we have just read, Mary Magdalene stayed outside the tomb crying because they had taken away her Lord and she did not know where they laid him. She did not recognise Jesus but took him to be the gardener. When he spoke her name she recognised him and responded, "Rabbouni" (Teacher). But when she reached out Jesus told her not to touch him. Whatever was happening to Jesus was not yet complete. "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

This year's Lent course here at St Martin's has been about the Eucharist in which bread is taken, blessed, broken and given. Over the weeks people have spoken intimately, honestly, vulnerably, powerfully about the meaning and significance of the Eucharist for them. Here in church, in thanksgiving we receive the body and blood of Christ into our hands, into ourselves. In bread and wine we touch and taste Christ's risen body in a way that was denied to Mary Magdalene.

This Easter morning, we stand on holy ground as Christ meets us here, renews us, enlivens us, and shows us yet again that in the end love always wins. In our lives he encourages us once again to live as people who portray the resurrection. So however life's been, whatever the triumphs or humiliating failures, here is a new beginning.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia!