

In all the Wrong Places Easter Day - 4th April 2010

Reading:

Luke 24: 1-12

There's a story told that in the early 1920's, Bukharin, the Soviet leader, was sent from Moscow to Kiev to address a vast anti-God rally. For one hour he brought to bear all the artillery of argument, abuse and ridicule upon the Christian faith, till it seemed that the whole ancient structure of belief was in ruins.

At the end there was a silence. Questions were invited. A man rose and asked leave to speak, a priest in the Orthodox Church. He stood beside Bukharin, faced the people, and gave them the ancient liturgical Easter greeting, "*Christos Voskresje*" "Christ is Risen". Instantly the whole vast assembly rose to its feet and the reply came back like a crash of breakers against a cliff, "*Vojestene Voskresje*" - "*He is Risen indeed*". The priest was to disappear from history, but the message of Christ's triumph over death lived on even in Communist Russia. The Resurrection message is for those who need hope.

Nearly ninety years later however, I get a little nervous as I listen to another Orthodox priest boasting of how his church was now a vital part of the new government - the church and the government were one, and I wondered if the Risen Christ would be as comfortable with such a collaboration, for Jesus the Christ loved to appear, not with the powerful but with the persecuted, the unhealthy ones, the outsiders of his day. In fact Christ is to be seen not so much in cathedrals and parliaments but in the most unlikely of places.

That's what the women who processed in sadness to complete the burial rituals for the one they loved called Jesus, discovered. Jesus was not where they thought he should be. Safely wrapped up in a tomb. They are suddenly confronted by two men in dazzling clothes who ask them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but is risen."

This Easter has been a painful experience for me. For this Easter more than any I can remember the Church has been shrouded with controversy. Whether it has been the Catholic Church consumed with the sexual abuse scandal or bishops picking fights with atheist, Easter this year seems different. But that's only if you think the Risen Christ belongs solely in a church.

My word to you is that "**Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but is risen.**" And to think that Christ can be confined within the tomb-like walls of an institution is to miss totally the point of Jesus' living and rising. Jesus the Christ came free us from the constraints of organized religion. He did not come to pick fights with non-believers but to show them and all people God's radical way of love. He lived out that way, and in the end it was this that killed him. But the powers would never contain or tame God's Spirit which today is found in all the wrong places.

Like the man Mark who took ages to find a church that would have him, a church in which he could dance. During the hymns and through songs of praise, during sermons sometimes, rocking, spinning in his wheelchair. "It disturbs the congregation," they told him. "Makes

people feel uncomfortable in church." And he mused graciously, "People are afraid I guess, afraid of joy." Eventually he found a small community church where Christ seemed more at home, far from the exclusive cathedral.

And like Angela, a single mum who accompanied a small group of us down to see the then Minister of Community Services, telling the Minister far more eloquently than we professionals could of how her life was radically changed by the unconditional love of a group of caring welfare workers.

She named it as her conversion. It was as if Christ was there in Angela as she spoke of renewal, of resurrection life. Not in a church but in a community centre. Not in a church but in the politician's office. Christ can be found in the most unlikely of places.

And that's the strength of this Easter prayer that I read at our Dawn service early this morning. It, like that original Easter message, is delivered by two women, this time from the Iona community named Ruth Burgess and Kathy Galloway.

***Lord Jesus, we are always looking for you in the wrong places;
among the good and respectable people,
when we should know you are to be found
with the poor and disreputable and outcast.
Lord Jesus, we are always looking for you in the wrong places,
at a safe distance, but you come so close to us,
nearer to us than breathing.
We look for you in churchy things,
but we're most likely to find you
among the pots and pans or around the kitchen table.
We look for you in buildings,
but you walked crowded streets, and shorelines and mountains....
Even now, even after Easter,
still we insist on trying to find you among the tombstones;
among long dead dogmas, in old, decaying fears and hurts,
in the guilt and resentments we inhabit like a coffin.
Lord Jesus help us to lay down the grave clothes,
roll away the stone and come out into life, here and now.
We will find you among the living,
ahead of us, going towards the Galilee we seek.
You have wrestled death to the ground,
and now there is nowhere we can go,
no darkness we can enter, which is not God-encompassed.***

This is what that first Easter message is about. So when you leave here this morning you will not be leaving the Christ behind but I assure you that you are more likely to meet up with him in the most unlikely of places.

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