

Sunday 12 April 2009: Easter Day

The Empty Tomb

Readings: Isaiah 25.6-9; Acts 10.34-43; John 20.1-18

The action of today's Gospel takes place in Jerusalem – a name derived from the Hebrew, meaning peace, harmony and completeness. If only. This holy city where the three major Abrahamic faiths meet – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and a history which goes back before the 4th Century BC – has been destroyed twice, besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times and captured and recaptured 44 times. In 2001, I visited Jerusalem on my own wanting to see for myself the place of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. It was a time of tension: the year of the intifada, or state of uprising, and there were only a handful of religious pilgrims in Jerusalem. In my diary I recorded my impressions.

This was one of my entries:

Wednesday 13th February. I woke up very early and went over to St. George's Cathedral. It is in a Palestinian area to the east of the old city. It is Ash Wednesday but there are only two of us here for the Eucharist. It is cool inside: scrubbed bleached stone, very Anglican – calm and beautiful but empty. After breakfast I set off for the old city of Jerusalem – to visit the Holy Sepulchre – Christ's place of death and resurrection. I pass through the Damascus Gate and into the Muslim Quarter – through a busy market area: hanging meats, Palestinians carrying freshly baked twists and rings of bread on huge trays on their heads, a boy sorting out his loaves in the dust on the ground, like the boy who shared his five loaves and two fish with Jesus. I walk on through a narrow street lined with cloths and fabrics hanging, artefacts, crafts, crosses and icons, many outside their stalls blocking the narrow street and trying to entice me into their shops with small cups of thick sweet coffee and a desperate need to sell. Turning right I enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre via the roof through a monastery of Ethiopian monks, two who are bearded and thin and wearing dusty black robes are praying near the stopper. Then I walk down through two gloomy Coptic chapels across a courtyard and into the Greek Orthodox section. Everything is divided up. I am told that the tensions between the different denominations can be so great that a Muslim looks after the key to the Holy Sepulchre to prevent arguments.

I kiss the stone of unction where Christ's body was prepared for burial, an 18th Century addition, and then climb up the steep stone steps – up onto the rock of Golgotha – now a heavily decorated chapel with hanging lamps. There are two Orthodox monks in here praying and a Franciscan Brother. I sit down with them and pray. The rock believed to be the rock of Golgotha can now be seen through Perspex. Under the altar is hand-hole through which you can stretch down and touch the rock on which Christ is believed to have died. I take off my Brother's cross from around my neck, kneel down and reach to touch – letting my hand and the cross touch the stone. Faith or superstition? It feels dark and strangely shabby, and yet the air is full of mystery and devotion and centuries of struggle and prayer. There is something very human here: popular religion, hands on, sweated over, imperfect expressions of something believed and breathed. There is no glamour – more a deep sense in me that the one I have come to worship is a real person, who faced real division, struggle and death. God knows he didn't have it easy either then or now – none of the shiny success of a leading evangelical. Yes God made very human flesh, incarnated here, who did dwell among us, down here in the dust and shadows; now imperfectly worshipped, his message of love and peace so squandered, but so needed. There is no one here now, tourists don't come as they used to.

I go down the steps again and round to the place they say is Christ's tomb – far closer to Golgotha than I was expecting. In its present form the tomb is more like a tatty stall and behind it a dark and derelict looking chapel belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church. I buy a rosary and a candle from a Coptic monk and have it blessed by him. Then I go into the tomb and touch the 16th Century marble slab cover and pray.

I pray for peace, peace in the Holy Land, peace in this incredible city, peace in my own life – it is the gift of the resurrected Christ.

I had been warned against being disappointed by this place but I am not disappointed at all. It is an empty tomb. I have not come to worship a building or a place. But his presence is here – beyond the tackiness of our attempts to contain him. He is here: palpable, touchable, human – located amidst all our frailties and dilapidated visions, crumbling history and foolish prejudices. He is here: so human and yet so beyond this dark grave. He is here now just as he was then but he has rolled away the gravestone – proclaiming new life and hope and peace to a conflict torn people. And I light my small flickering candle in the tomb of the man who long ago left this grave and who is, we are told, the light of the world.

That is what I wrote about the empty tomb in Jerusalem. But as I read these words I realise that this Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is not one place or time or building. It is the unconfined Christ calling us out of the tomb and into the life of God wherever we are. Early this morning while it was still dark, we came to St Martin-in-the Fields. We came like those first disciples – knowing our mix of betrayal, faith and doubt. We came not because we wanted to worship something that was past or dead, not because of the beauty of this building of stone with its renewed spaces filled with fresh flowers, we came because we were excited – because we still dare to believe that the one who was crucified lives. That's the truth we seek: not a building, not even a community – “Do not be afraid, the one you are looking for is risen and has gone ahead of you.” Today in the Eucharist, with Louise who was baptised this morning and with all of us who have been baptised, we came and we come to make that journey with Christ from darkness to light, from fear to hope, from death to life.

Mary in our Gospel comes to the tomb early in the morning and finds it empty. The stone has been rolled away. At first she is confused. She runs to tell Simon and the others. But when she returns later to the tomb there is no sense of hope, she comes to the tomb as if to a grave that has been robbed. After the horror and trauma of the crucifixion at least in death Christ's body can be honoured. The Church like that tomb, can become a place of self-preservation, where we can turn away from the world and bring our sorrow and loss – a place to defend and hold onto the memories of the past. But now for Mary at the tomb even paying respect to the body of the one she loves seems to have been torn from her. When Mary sees the angels she does not stop weeping. In her grief she does not recognise either the angel or even the one for whom she weeps. And the grief is like fear: fear we have all known that we will never love or be loved or belong to or find again. And that fear feels dark and Godless. Mary cries for a dead body and a grave. She clings to the dead for it is all she has left. And then, Jesus speaks to her “Woman, why are you crying” and still she does not recognise him, she thinks he is the gardener. “They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him.” All through this Gospel there has been a confusion: a failure to see the eternal in our midst. Christ has offered the living temple but we have seen only bricks and stone. Now the risen Christ calls Mary from the grave and she thinks he is the gardener. And then he calls her by name – “Mary” – and she turns; the sound of her name spoken by the one who knows her turning her around from death to life. This is the Good Shepherd who knows the name of each one of his sheep and calls them by name. Mary turns and opens her eyes to the living and the eternal. Mary turns and sees.

And now Mary wants to hold onto that revelation, to hold onto and grasp the thing she loves. The temptation of life is always the longing to contain and possess. But if we grasp tight, the water of life runs through our fingers. A lover longs to hold onto the beloved, a mother longs to hold onto her child but Christ's call is to let go; this love is a call into the risk of freedom. It does not belong in a tomb, it must be lived; it cannot be held onto; it cannot be contained by a gravestone; it is a love which fills us like the breath the risen Christ breathes on his disciples; it is a love which burns in our hearts along the road like those on the road to Emmaus, which meets us in Eucharist and then vanishes from our sight: resurrection – like the flashing, silver, vibrant energy of a shoal of fish big enough to sink a boat. This life Christ offers does not imprison us in the past but calls us into God's eternity now. This resurrection is Christ's life breaking through our blindness. That is the meaning of Church: not some institution, not a building of stone but Christ's living body. In this Eucharist we are called to become the visible sign of that resurrection. In each one of you, in our own frail human flesh we are called to be resurrected body of Christ. That is quite a challenge. It is sometimes easier for us not hear our name and remain the victim weeping at the tomb.

In the three hour service on Good Friday, Nick, our vicar, talked of one person who had asked why our new East Window was broken. For this person it had seemed as if there was a hole at the centre – God bursting in through the brokenness. As I looked up at the window I saw a stone that had rolled away and we, inside the tomb, called like Lazarus to come out through that brokenness, into the life and light of resurrection. “Unbind him.” “Unbind her.” That's the mission of the Church: to set us free to live resurrection. The light fractures outwards like a stone thrown into a pool of water, the circle of waves widening to embrace all. I want you to imagine that it is you who are waiting at the tomb. And it is your name Christ calls.