

Easter Sunday - Lawrence [Geoff Miller]

How do you know that Easter's come?

I guess the optimist might say, 'the sun is shining, the sky is blue and the daffodils are in flower' whereas the pessimist will be quick to retort, 'don't cast a clout 'til May is out'. There will be those whose spirits ride high, like they are on high dose, quick to tell us that, 'the Lord is Risen: he is risen indeed', while others feel more like Thomas, that they missed the showing and at the very least are reluctant to make a decision one way or another. Some will be basking in resurrection, celebrating good news, a new job or a new house, a new child or a new love, while close neighbours will be wishing that they could turn the clock back, struggling with pain, brokenness, facing a bleak future or stuck in sad past.

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Rather like the woman Vicar who resigned her post because she couldn't forgive the terrorists who had, in the planting of a bomb, killed her teenage daughter – she wrote of Easter Sunday; 'I will be stuffing myself with chocolate but really I will still be stuck in Good Friday.'

And churches will be no different. There will be those enchanted by the heavenly choirs with bells and smells or guitars and tambourines declaring the triumph of an empty tomb nigh on oblivious to the horrors of Syria, hunger in Africa, the devastation of poverty, homelessness or the despair of the refugee never mind the struggles of their neighbours: Some will be pleased that Easter Sunday came and desperate to forget that it

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couldn't have happened without Good Friday. Yet again there will be those who remain firmly locked in their beloved building, surrounded by the same familiar faces, wringing their hands about how to raise money for the restoration work or the Parish Share, or beating their breasts about dwindling numbers and disappearing young people or at worst just hoping that if they sit tight and carry on doing what they've always done 'it will see them out'.

And I was thinking, 'What about this Parish and its people?' How does Jesmond view Easter? Are you ready for the simplistic triumphalism that closes its eyes to struggle and difficulty abroad or here on your doorstep?

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Are you locked in the hopeless world of decline and demoralised living, thinking that there's not much hope for the future of the church – well at least not here.

My only strategy for authentic Eastering, for making sure that the real here and now (that can feel like Good Friday) is infused with Resurrection hope is to look for what I call an earthing device. It's a phrase that I pinched (or learnt) from Anthony Gormley when describing the Angel of the North. He said that the statue reached to the heavens but pulled people down to earth. So I want to share with you today my Easter 'earthing device'.

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I want to introduce you to a very dear friend of mine who constantly calls me back to the struggles of life infused with Easter hope.

Lawrence always liked Easter, just as he liked Sundays and Church. He was a 'regular' at church and in our parish everyone new that, 'regular' and Lawrence just went together. Just like clockwork at morning Communion and again at Evensong, when the sermon got underway Lawrence would arrive. We all heard him, a deliberate opening of the large doors which were always let go with a thud. And then there was the clunk and drag of his steel capped shoes as he walked down the aisle to his usual place in the middle of the front pew, disturbing the people on the row to get to his preferred

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seat. There was always a beaming smile at the preacher, and at those all around, as he took his place and settled down. Then we all knew it was Sunday.

Afterwards at coffee there was the regular conversation too, it went something like this:

'Hello Vicar, are you alright?'

'Yes thanks how are you?'

'Fine, is there another biscuit?'

'Of course'

And the conversation would be repeated a few times well at least until the biscuits ran out.

When I got to know Lawrence he was in his late forties, a tall slender man never dressed particularly scruffy but never really smart, never dirty but not quite clean. He

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was balding, as men of his age - and mine - often are! He had a long thin face with potted skin markings and a wonderful smile that lit up his small pleading eyes.

Of his years more than 40 had been spent in the confines of Prudhoe Hospital in his day an institution for the mentally insane, later a psychiatric hospital. At the age of 47 he had been allowed to come and live in what was described as a 'half way house' in our parish. The move had transformed his life. The snooker table, his tiny flat, the holidays, Vera his special friend, the nights at the church socials, visiting his family, the corner shop which sold him cigarettes one at a time, his love of music and especially hymns. He used especially to like to come and visit the vicarage for a cuppa. I remember one such

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occasion with great delight. He told me about nightmares that dogged him and we rehearsed how he could wake himself up and feel safe again. It sked what he ate for supper - 'Cheese on toast.' he said. 'Well don't,' I advised. He went off happy.

And I remember especially his 50th Birthday party – the dickey-bow and velvet jacket, the honoured guests, the buffet, the watch and the speech.

Lawrence is my Easter 'earthing device'! An Icon for Easter if you will! In truth he taught me what Easter was really about:

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His life was a sign of the transformation that human dignity and community brings.

He knew the cross but he proved to me the resurrection.

When given the dignity he deserved, a simple yet disturbingly profound and beautiful person began to emerge. From death to life was no simple credo – for him it was the story of his life. And for those of us who were privileged to get to know him we were able to glimpse the resurrection imprinted on his life and so we glimpsed the Risen Christ in him.

He saw with such straightforwardness the joys of life

His almost irritating question, ‘How are you vicar?’ repeated a thousand times each encounter, revealed if

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only I would allow it to a real concern for my good and everybody else's for that matter. His pride at his friends, his new flat, the slightest kindness... the twinkle in the eye. Life for Lawrence was made up of a thousand little resurrections.... He saw them where I did not, he had hope when I did not. The Risen Christ imprints himself on every encounter, on the pattern of creation, on the possibilities for the future. He calls us to notice him Risen in our world, little resurrections that point to his great victory, a victory signalled by an empty tomb and erupting minute by minute on an unsuspecting world.

Lawrence's own simplicity and childlike joy brought out the resurrection hope in others –

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Otherwise I would have forgotten him long ago. In those privileged to be called his friends, those who laughed at his antics and regularities, those who were irritated by some of his habits and those who could not but be enchanted by him, even those who complained about him yet still baked him scones, invited him for coffee, looked after him on parish outings, kept his packet of cigarettes on the back shelf of the shop...His joy was infectious and delightful, his vulnerability was affirming. If he could be so simply happy so could we. We felt somehow needed in his presence. And the Risen Christ was among us in our joy, in the victory over impossible odds that we witnessed in this new life at the half way house born from an old existence in a mental hospital in Prudhoe.

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With Lawrence you did not have to say that you believed in the Risen Christ you saw him for yourself.

What could be the ‘earthing’ device for Resurrection hope for you? What could be the trigger that forces you back not just onto yourselves but to the only hope that we have, the hope of the crucified and Risen Christ? Could the Church’s experience here in the coming months be one that witnesses to the transforming power of Christ? Could we see in real concrete ways how new life comes out of hard situations? How can the people of God in this place witness to the possibilities of the future amid the adversities of today? How can the simple joys of life be treasured and how can the situation here bring Easter

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hope to others? It's a tall order but not an impossible one – at least only as impossible as Lawrence's joy in a hard life. Only as impossible as an empty tomb in a garden in first century Palestine?

It was not long after Lawrence's birthday party that he was found dead in the bathroom of his small flat. A massive brain haemorrhage they said. I went to the house to prepare the funeral. 'Can we ask you a question?' the warden said. 'Sometime ago Lawrence came to see you. He had a problem he wouldn't talk to us about but he told us that you helped him and told me not to eat cheese?' What was it all about?

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Everything was prepared. The mayor was going to attend the service as she was chairman of the Trustees. For once Lawrence arrived on time.

‘What hymns shall we have at the service?’ I asked his friends. Vera shouted up straight away:

‘His favourite was Jesus Christ is risen today’

‘Why’ I asked

‘Well because of his surname of course. And believe me this is true:

Lawrence was called Lawrence **Easter**.

Sisters and Brothers Christ is Risen

He is risen indeed Alleluia