

THE MESSENGER

APRIL 2007

Easter - A Matter of Life and Death

John Clark

Many years ago I was staying in the holy Muslim city of Mashhad in North Eastern Iran - a centre for Muslim pilgrimage. On a Sunday I will never forget I went to the one church in the city. The Anglican Bishop in Iran - an Iranian - was preaching in Farsi to a small congregation. He spoke about the Easter events of Jesus' death and resurrection. He explained how it was a defining event - opening up the path for human beings to God and providing the clue to understanding the meaning of life and death.

Dying and Rising

The secret of coming more alive is found in the pattern of dying and rising. The cycle of life and death is common to our existence. Spring follows winter leading into summer and autumn. Plants burst from the soil, come into bloom, die and return to the soil. Life through death. New life comes through a laying aside of the old.

Jesus death and resurrection which this year is marked in April

was a climactic event for humanity. It has many facets. Jesus took upon himself, the pain, the darkness the horror of the world, of human sin even to death - but that pressure could not keep him down and on the third day he rose from the dead in a transformed way as evidence that life triumphed over death. Through his death, death itself was conquered and humankind could be reconciled to God and find peace with God.

Coming alive

But the events of Easter also reveals the secret of all aliveness, his and ours. Life is renewed through the habitual laying down of life. Jesus said - 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains solitary; but if it dies it bears much fruit'

It is the pattern of our lives from the start. Human birth must feel to the baby like dying. It is the end of the only existence it has known. What one writer has called 'a marvellously secure and balanced form of life in the womb has broken down and last moorings with reality are cast off - which is just what happens at the end of our earthly story.' Yet the child comes into a much freer

and richer world when the time in the womb has come to an end.

Letting go

And it does not end there. In any of our lives, Christian or not, there are many little deaths - it may be painful and frightening and costly - the ending of a relationship; the failure of an exam; loss of a job; moving house; a child leaving home; retirement; death of a parent or family member. Experiencing the 'little dying' - a letting go - can open the way to moving on and receiving new life - but hanging on can be deadening. And God wants us to come more and more alive.

The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is extensive - the empty tomb, the number of appearances to different people, the failure of the authorities to discredit the disciples' claims. But perhaps the most significant is the transformed lives of his followers, who in turn went out to share their experience with others. So it has continued down the centuries. In following the one who died and rose again people have discovered the secret to the matter of life and death - how to come more and more alive.

Failure wins through

Last month Sandy Christie, our vicar, wrote about the benefit of doubt: one thing that the church never offers is freedom from our uncertainties. Those are part of what makes us human, and all that Jesus asks is for us to approach with 'honest doubt': when we do so, he answers us with devastating clarity. He will

It is not the healthy who need a doctor

not do that for 'dishonest doubt' the tricky kind that scribes and pharisees were always trying on him.

Last month also, Marian Curtis our curate, spoke to us about the people that Jesus and God had chosen to spread Christianity: not the bright and beautiful, far from it, but doubting people used to spread certainties, stammering people used to preach clarity, stupid people to proclaim profundity, cruel people to spread kindness. One way or another, Jesus chose a lot of failures.

Jesus went to dinner with a man called Levi (Mark 2), a tax-collector. The scribes asked why he was eating with 'sinners', people who did not conform to their external pieties. Jesus replied 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' What did he mean by 'the righteous'? The scribes obviously thought that he meant them, but they could not have been more wrong. They were the ones that Jesus called 'whited sepulchres', clean on the outside but corrupt within.

Still, was Jesus saying that there were some men and women who did not need him, who were good enough already?

It is not likely when you think of God's standards. To us, a murderer is someone who kills another person. That is what the Jews thought (Numbers 35: 16), and interpreted the Ten Commandments accordingly. But Jesus says 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment' (Matthew 5: 21). How can we equate anger at our brother with murder? Only by an unachievable standard.

Again, if we think of adultery at all, we see it as a married person having sex with someone other than their spouse. That is not how Jesus sees it: 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery", but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5: 27). President Jimmy Carter knew his Bible well enough to recognise this; most of us do not.

People sometimes suggest that Jesus is saying thinking an angry thought is identical in God's eyes to and as bad as murder. But that is not what Jesus is saying – judgment will be highly discriminating and nuanced (see eg Luke 12:47-48). Of course murdering someone is worse than being angry with them, just as some murders are worse than others, and committing adultery is worse than just considering it. Jesus is saying is rather that anger is in essence the same heart-attitude as murder, lust as

adultery, etc, and therefore just because you haven't gone that far don't think you're in the clear.

God's standards are beyond us to achieve; but we are exhorted to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5: 48). By those standards we are all failures, none if us perfect. And Jesus knew that he had to work with those failures: that is why he chose Simon Peter as the first apostle, even though he knew that Peter would desert him. That is also why he confirmed Peter as the leader of the apostles after the resurrection. Peter got a second chance, we all get a second chance. Even as Simon Peter was promising to follow Jesus to the death, Jesus knew that he would fail but said to him 'But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22: 31).

All those 'sick' people whom God has used are people like us all: real people with real weaknesses and foibles, reminding us that God is for every single person.

When the scribes criticised Jesus, it was themselves that they condemned: Jesus consorted with tax-gatherers and prostitutes not because they were the only ones that needed him but because they would listen. Their doubts were honest doubts, their failures the first step to heavenly success.



CROSSLINKS

Sue Stopforth

CROSSLINKS is one of several Mission Societies actively supported through St. Michael's Church. Like Tearfund and London City Mission, which perhaps you have already heard of, CROSSLINKS is involved in activities that help people with their immediate practical needs as well as through prayer and Bible teaching.

Some projects are in the UK but many are in other countries. Between January and March this year, for example, CROSSLINKS asked us to pray for projects as far afield as Uganda, Myanmar (Burma), Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Serbia. Many different projects are supported – care for disabled children and their parents, literacy teaching, ante natal care, baby vaccinations and HIV counselling – but CROSSLINKS' special focus from 2007 is 'Church Planting'.

Church Planting isn't as easy as it might sound – although there are plenty of examples from around the world of how it can happen. The Tabora region in Tanzania is a good example. Since 2000, through training local pastors, evangelists and holding open air meetings until the new churches are built, about 40 more villages now have their own gatherings for Christian worship and teaching – and some have a new building too.

But Church Planting isn't only about worship and teaching, it's also about transforming communities from the inside out. Another example, this time from

India – Kachhwa is South East of Delhi and not far from Varanasi, and Kachhwa Ministries has six interlinked priorities for its surrounding rural areas.

Spiritual transformation – using small churches known as 'pavitra sabhas' (holy assemblies) as the focus for personal and community change.

Essential clinical services – with a new purpose built hospital for the area, to provide quality care for the people suffering from a wide range of poverty linked diseases.

Community health – by establishing health teams in some villages and mobile clinics in others, and by sinking 50 new wells for clean drinking water.

Micro-enterprise development – for example training students to become electricians, as a way to increase their economic activity – and training for women to read, sew and breed animals.

Education – through training villagers as teachers, meeting under trees, there are now 74 local schools with over a 100 teachers.

Leadership training – by providing training on its campus for 1000 people a month, Kachhwa enables new Christians become house church leaders, church planters and Bible teachers.

Kachhwa's vision is for local churches to serve as 'salt and light' to transform their communities in every dimension.

CROSSLINKS supports Church Planting in the UK too.

Easter Services at St Michael's



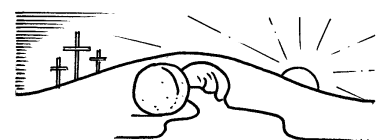
Maundy Thursday
8:00pm Holy Communion

Good Friday
10:30am Joint Service at Whitfield's Mount on Blackheath (Members of all local churches take part – lasts about 1 hour)

2:00pm Good Friday Meditation in Church (about 1 hour)

Easter Sunday
10:30am Holy Communion

Holy Week is the most important season of the year for Christians. It begins with Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. Maundy Thursday is the day when Jesus washed his disciples' feet and celebrated the Last Supper. On Good Friday Jesus was crucified. Lent ends on Easter Saturday, and Easter Sunday is the day of the resurrection and Jesus' return to life.





Services in April

Sunday 1st April
10:30 Worship Together
6:30 Holy Communion

Sunday 8th April
Easter Sunday
10:30 Holy Communion

Sunday 15th April
10:30 Morning Prayer
6:30 Holy Communion

Sunday 22nd April
9:00 Holy Communion
10:30 Holy Communion

Sunday 29th April
10:30 Morning Prayer
6:30 Evening Prayer

For Easter Services, please see the panel within.

There is no evening service on Easter Sunday or on 22nd April.

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

The Annual Parish Meeting will be in the Hall on 26th April at 8:00pm. All Parishioners and Worshippers welcome

CRICKET

St. Michael's will be playing against St John's in Greenwich Park on 10th June

PICNIC & CONCERT

Proms in Blackheath Park will be on 7th July

Extracts from the Registers

Funerals 2006

January

9 Sylvia Elizabeth Muriel Steel (75)

12 James Edward Shilling (88)

23 Louisa Catherine Slack (96)

March

3 Arthur Baggett (84)

30 Helen Florence Kinnell Waller (79)

April

11 Annie Victoria Whitty (84)

11 Josephine Doris Neil (70)

May

5 Peter James Reeves (79)

26 Lillian Rose Hyde (96)

June

5 Kathleen Price 91)

July

14 Joseph O'Neill

25 Marie Reynolds (97)

August

1 Celia Margaret Hallsworth (59)

8 James Powell (76)

October

4 Violet Megan Stevens (80)

19 Betty Burnard (91)

24 Mayfield Hyacinth Humphrey-Gaskin (96)

November

22 Laszlo Kovats (77)

December

8 Andrew Glass

J - i - C # 98 & 99

I like Dorset, Essex and Durham, love Somerset and Herefordshire, and go into raptures about Cornwall, Rutland and Norfolk. Where would I love most, and where dislike?

Which is the odd one out: N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W, NW

Solutions to last month's puzzles:

'In action' and 'inaction'

Bison, Camel, Hyena, Hyrax, Llama, Mouse or moose or horse, Sheep or shrew, Stoat, Tapir, Tiger or vixen, Steer, Zebra



...I don't care how many kilowatts it produces... you haven't got planning permission!!

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St Michael's: making time for the things that matter

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