A Resurrection Church

EASTER DAY 2019 St Mary’s 10.45

Fr Stephen Tucker

In a large public assembly hall in Moscow, a public lecture is being given by the Bolshevist Commissary for Popular Education. He is demonstrating to a large audience the obsolescence of Christianity. This religion, he says, is a product of the capitalist classes for the oppression of the poor. It is completely irrational, and can easily be shown to be without any factual basis. The lecturer is very eloquent and the lecture seems to have gone down well. Feeling confident, he invites discussion; anyone who wants to, can come up onto the platform, give his name and speak, though not for more than 5 minutes. A young priest – shy and awkward and clearly from a country parish – comes onto the platform. The lecturer, feeling sure that such a man cannot pose any problems, reminds him that he must only speak for five minutes; the priest assures him he won’t need that long. He turns to the audience and says, ‘Brothers and sisters: Christ is risen!’ And with one voice the audience responds, ‘He is risen indeed’. The priest leaves the platform and the meeting is at once called to a halt.

That story from the 1920s speaks powerfully of a faith which cannot be suppressed. It demonstrates the putting down of the mighty and the exaltation of the humble and meek. It reveals the church as an Easter people – in whom Christ is risen. During the early years of Russian Communism thousands of churches and monasteries were taken over by the government and either destroyed or converted to secular use. No new churches could be built.Orthodox priests and believers were variously [tortured](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torture), sent to [prison camps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulag), [labour camps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharashka)or [mental hospitals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punitive_psychiatry_in_the_Soviet_Union), or [executed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_punishment).And yet the Church survived.

The brave, young village priest in the Moscow assembly hall used the acclamation which we used at the start of this service. ‘Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.’ He did not seek to argue with the lecturer and try to prove him wrong. He used instead the power of a communal faith and tradition. He appealed to the experience of the audience who since their childhood would have attended the Easter services, joined in the Easter songs, given the Easter greeting to their family, their friends and  neighbours. You might say that all their Easters had prepared them beforehand for this one courageous yet dangerous demonstration of their faith. In the same was Bonhoeffer speaks of a girl in her early teens going with her Bible class to a Christian camp during the Easter holidays in Nazi Germany. She goes into the meeting hall where they are gathering for their first session and sees a portrait of Hitler on the wall. Immediately she walks up to it, takes it down and puts it away in a cupboard. A brave action for someone of her age, yet we might say she was prepared beforehand for what she did by the renewal of hope at Easter, the assurance of sins forgiven, the glimpse of joy and glory. She knew something of what  the disciples knew, as the story of Christ rising unfolded on that first Easter morning.

In listening to Mary Magdalen’s part in that story this morning, we might picture for ourselves the rapid changes in her emotions. The desolation brought about by Jesus’ death, her anger that his body might have been removed, her puzzlement with this figure she takes to be a gardener, the joy of recognising Jesus, her need to prolong the moment, the fear that she must take this unbelievable news to the disciples. We might be able to identify with at least some of those emotions. But then again, we might ask questions.

Do we wonder why Mary Magdalen doesn’t recognise Jesus straight away? Do we want to know what resurrection involves? What sort of body does Jesus have or is this some kind of vision?

Or finally, might we approach this story wondering about its implications for us? Though we may not understand what a risen, glorified body might actually be like, this story is the basis of our belief in a future resurrection for ourselves and those whom we have loved who have died. We will be raised as Jesus was raised to live a life outside time in the presence of God. Though we cannot now comprehend such a life, this story prepares us beforehand to approach our own death as a gateway to new life.

On Good Friday I asked what kind of community tells this kind of story – the story of Holy Week? The answer to that question for today is that this should be a community that enters emotionally and spiritually into the story; a community that is not afraid to ask hard questions of the story; and a community that can look death in the face with hope. And finally, this should be a community that is able to live the story in the present, as that Orthodox community was living it in the lecture hall in Moscow.

If you come to church this morning having just heard some very bad news; if you come deeply worried about someone or struggling with a crisis in your own life; if you come with a passionate concern about particular issues in our world; if you come bearing the same old burdens that are always with you and which only seem to get heavier; if you come seeking baptism or renewing the vows made at your baptism, the truth of the story we tell today must be true for your circumstances too. Christ is risen today in your life. Christ is risen in you to be the strength you need, Christ is risen to be the power of prayer in you, to be the comfort and support you need from other people; Christ is risen to be in you the courage to do something that will make a difference.

When the Russian priest spoke to that audience, they responded with the words ‘*Voistinu voscres’*which means not quite the same as our ‘He is risen indeed.’ It means, ‘He is truly risen’. And in speaking thus to the Commissar for popular education they were asserting the real, actual, eternal, truth of their faith. And even the arguments of a Commissar of education cannot stand up to the faith of a people who believe in the Resurrection because Christ is risen in us and in our lives. Amen.