

23 Mar 2008 Easter Day

Matthew 28: 1-10

Just this week I came across these words by the playwright, Alan Bennett. He says: Never read the Bible as if it means something. Nor prayers. The liturgy is best treated and read as if it's someone announcing the departure of trains.

Well, if that's the case, I'm not sure how Alan Bennett handles Easter with all these Alleluias and bells and incense and all the rest. This is not train announcing.

And neither is Matthew's Gospel. Matthew is your special effects Gospel writer. Not content with earthquakes and shattering rocks, and the dead leaving their tombs and the Temple curtain ripped right down the middle at the Crucifixion, today we get another earthquake, and - I like this - an angel descending to roll away the stone and then nonchalantly sit on it.

Now modern Bible translation sometimes sells us short on all this. One writer says of the New English Bible, that even the end of the world is described as if it were only an exceptionally hot afternoon. But this explosion of purple prose and extravagant images Matthew gives us is his way of breaking into your consciousness and mine to say something amazing has happened here.

So what's the amazing thing that's happened here? Jesus has risen from the dead! Well, no he hasn't. God has raised Jesus from the dead and the difference is crucial. Because if this is just Jesus being wonder-boy – you know, Clark Kent jumps into a telephone box and emerges as Superman – then it's not much use to us, because none of us can do that. If he just bursts out of the tomb and says: hey, gotcha there didn't I? Well, it's just a trick, just a con in really bad taste.

But if the raising business is down to God, and if Jesus is a child of God like you or me, well then it starts to get interesting because maybe it really means something for us. Because what it says is that it is a dazzlingly wonderful and sacred thing to be human. Death and darkness can do their worst, but there's something unconquerable and inextinguishable about the human spirit – and over these three days we've seen it played out.

This Easter, I've been so conscious of those energies of the Spirit that are constantly creating new things. On the night of Maundy Thursday after feasting at Passover and eating and drinking possibly more than is decent in Lent, we stripped this place bare as the naked Christ and bare as our own sorrows and left it in darkness. But today it's full of springtime, renewed and restored by loving hands, flowers arranged with all the care you'd lavish on a royal visit.

And all because this story *really* is all about us, and therefore it's inspired human beings to create the most sublime artistic expressions of which we are capable – from Michelangelo to Bach to our own Stainer's Crucifixion on Friday night. These three days tell it like it is for all of us. Good Fridays of loss and desolation; long Holy Saturdays of waiting and not knowing and thinking everything's finished; and at last a new dawn you barely dared to hope for. Who doesn't live those three days in their own life?

But Matthew's angel comes with a message. Again, not wishing to skimp on detail Matthew describes him as clothed in lightning so that you could almost plug him into the national grid. But this lightning bolt of an angel erupts in front of these terrified women to tell them they needn't be afraid at all.

Because if God doesn't see death as the last word about Jesus, then death cannot be the last word about us. If God is that pulse of life out of which everything is constantly dying and being reborn, if God is the vastness that holds all things in an eternal now, then there is no way that death can be a full stop to what our lives mean.

St Paul, when he writes to the Ephesians, he tells them not to be afraid, but to trust and to let God “work you into his most excellent harmonies”. I love the idea that my little life, all of our lives, are a line in some music of God’s that goes singing its way through the cosmos into an eternity I can’t even imagine.

The editor of yesterday’s Telegraph found hope in a similar thought: He writes – “Our world is one, where, in Matthew Arnold’s words, ignorant armies clash by night. In the muddle of events we need any light we can get”. It is, he says, a light, a vision that artists and musicians see more clearly than anyone else. This is why the music of our young choir that was so moving on Good Friday and leads our Alleluias today is so precious – because just as for Matthew, so our hymns and anthems and alleluias are *a* totally over-the-top poetry of the heart.

The other night at our Passover when I actually made us all sing something vaguely happy-clappy I begged if we could please just for once not sing like Episcopalians. Matthew was definitely not an Episcopalian. And today we shouldn’t be either. This is a day for Hollywood Choirs and earthquakes, a glory of flowers, an excess of chocolate and electric angels. This is a day for joy beyond good sense or good taste. This is not a day for liturgical train-announcing. This is a day for every child of God, and a day for you. This is the third day, and the blessing of it is for every morning of our lives. Amen.