

A REFLECTION ON EASTER



Michael Bennett

THE EASTER EARTHQUAKE

Do not get me wrong. I love Easter – the newness, the life, the hope, the joy. But I do not like the noise. A strange statement you might say. Not so strange if you frequent an African township at Easter or Christmas time. Holiday season; long weekends. Party time. Loud noise, music blaring, beer flowing – not just in private homes, but on narrow township side-streets. The township where Godfrey Kisabuli, a young St Patrick’s priest, and I work is called Tsakane, about one hour from Johannesburg.

For the Christians in Tsakane, however, Easter is about “partying” of a different kind. They have lived with the quiet disciplines of Lent for many weeks and are now ready to explode in song and dance in true African liturgical fashion. And if we really open our hearts, the mystery of Easter is nothing less than an explosion.

THE FIRST EASTER

Go back in time to that first Easter. Something happened to those friends of Jesus because of something extraordinary that happened to Jesus himself. They had seen him nailed to a cross – Roman torture at its most brutal. Hopes dashed, many fled in fear. Yet, a contradictory message filtered through;

the tomb was empty; he had appeared; he had shown himself to certain people. St Paul provides a list of these Resurrection witnesses which was in early circulation among the Christian communities (1 Cor. 15:5-8). He says that some of the witnesses were still alive – which really means “check it out with them; they will tell you a lot more.” The impact was intense, revolutionary. From fear to courage, from despair to hope, from courage to joy. They proclaimed the Risen Lord.

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What did Jews in the first century believe about life after death? Some believed that the righteous would be resurrected at the end of time. More, that the dead would go to some shadowy underworld called Sheol. Others, that they would just go back to dust. No one believed that someone would be raised from the dead within their lifetime. Yet, this is what those witnesses were saying about Jesus. And the word “resurrection” had a specific meaning. It was, and is, about the material and spiritual, body and soul, being exalted, raised to a new glorious existence.

They were certainly not talking about some kind of subjective experience – a kind of wishful thinking: “we miss him so much; he is alive in our hearts.” Every page of the New Testament gives the lie

to that notion. A concrete event had taken place that transformed their understanding, their lives and their world. The crucified one is raised by God.

“YOU GOT IT WRONG”

“Jesus is Lord.” We say it so frequently and so tritely. But in that first century, who was Lord? Caesar, the Roman Emperor. When two Roman citizens met, they greeted each other by saying “Caesar is Lord.” By implication, they must be loyal to him and to the Empire. St Paul is saying, “No, you got it wrong. Jesus is Lord and Master.” Revolutionary stuff.

Not alone is Jesus Lord, but he is also Son of God. Mark begins his gospel by referring to the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mk. 1:1). Paul does likewise at the beginning of his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:3-5). Who was acclaimed as Son of God in that first century? The Roman Emperor. Mark and Paul are saying: “No you have again got it wrong. Caesar is not the Son of God. Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the true Son of God.” No wonder Paul spent so much time in Roman prisons! As a bishop once said: “When Paul preached, there were riots. When I preach, they serve me a cup of tea.”

We talk about gospel or good news. “Good news” is a translation of the Greek “*euangelion*” from which we get the English word “evangelisation.” When Caesar won a great victory over his enemies, messengers were sent to different parts of the Empire to let people know. This was “*euangelion*” or good news. The New Testament writers borrow this word to refer to the death and Resurrection of Christ. This is the real good news, not some Roman conquest.

MEANING OF EASTER FOR TODAY

There is extraordinary, dumbfounding news at Easter. About an event that took place in the first century, an earthquake that shook the world to its foundations. Fast forward to the twenty-first century. Is not the great danger today that we domesticate Easter, everything from Easter bunnies to Easter bonnets? Or to beer parties on a township street?

People in the Northern Hemisphere have just come through a difficult winter season struggling with Covid-19. And we continue to face the ongoing impact of global warming and climate change. Global actors must drastically reduce carbon emissions to achieve net zero if our planet is to survive. And so we may ask: What has Easter to say to these global realities?

Easter is not a lesson in medical science, providing the insights we need to protect ourselves from future pandemics. Nor does it offer clarity about

the evolutionary events of the cosmic story. Easter proclaims a bodily resurrection, that the material and spiritual are companions rather than foes. In raising Jesus, God has said “yes” to all of creation.

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Planet earth is a common home shared by human and non-human creatures alike. We must care for it in all its aspects – physical and spiritual. In God’s time our universe will be restored and renewed; it will not collapse into oblivion. The New Testament language of a future “new heavens” and a “new earth” does not provide scientific detail but it does provide us with extraordinary hope. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses this hope and “spurs us on” to care for, and renew, the world in our time.

The visible universe is itself destined to be transformed... (Paragraph 1047)

Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here (on earth) that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. (Paragraph 1049)

BECOMING EASTER PEOPLE

Easter proclaims victory over death. All that was hurled at Jesus – prejudice, deceit, hatred and violence – have been overcome in his death on a cross. “Death where is your victory?” “Death where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55) Death has no victory; its sting has gone. The inescapable event at the end of life can be embraced with great trust and confidence. As the innocent victim on the cross, Jesus bore the pain of the world without hatred or bitterness.

Our world today knows much indifference, hatred and evil. But they do not have the last word. The beer parties in Tsakane do not have the last word. There is more; much, much more. Compelled by the Spirit of the Risen Lord, the task of Christians is to overcome hatred with love, falsehood with truth, evil with sheer goodness. In doing so, we become Easter people, not just during the fifty days of the Easter season, but each day of our lives. ■



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