

Bishop of St Albans Easter Sermon, 2012

EASTER, 8 April 2012 St Albans Abbey

Acts 10.34-43; John 20.1-18

Picture the scene: the lifeless body of a young man in the prime of life is laid out on the ground. There is no breath in him. He is surrounded by a group of people, watching helplessly, some of them weeping. They cannot believe that such a thing could have happened. No one is sure what to do. Some fall to their knees in prayer.

Now, I am not describing the deposition of Jesus from the cross. Nor are the onlookers his weeping disciples. I am talking about Fabrice Muamba, the Bolton Wanderers' player, who collapsed three weeks ago with a heart attack in the middle of a match against Spurs.

One newspaper report read: 'After a brief chant of Fabrice Muamba's name, the crowd fell silent. The report continued: A team-mate fell to his knees, resting his chin on his fist. A woman in the crowd started crying. Everyone else was completely silent, watching medical staff from both teams gathered round the stricken player.'

One of his team-mates, Kyle Walker, tweeted that afternoon, 'Doesn't matter who you support. Doesn't matter if you aren't a football fan. Doesn't matter if you aren't religious. Pray for Fabrice Muamba.'

That same day Shauna Magunda, Muamba's fiancée, tweeted and asked people to pray - and pray is what people have been doing. Players and fans alike have been wearing shirts with the logo 'Pray for Muamba', the BBC had a headline '65m Congolese pray for Muamba' and the front of *The Sun* newspaper was emblazoned with the words 'God is in control' – not a headline you get in *The Sun* very often – or indeed in any national newspaper.

No matter what the pundits claim, God and prayer are still currency in today's so-called secular Britain. This was further backed up by the SayOne4Me survey this week which asked people about prayer. They found only 85% of Brits prayed – for their friends and family, for their future, for the world – only 15% said they never prayed.

When faced with suffering, evil or death there is something in the human spirit which refuses to give up hope – which rebels. Deep within our guts we cannot believe that suffering or death should have the final word. In the words of the poet, Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light

The defiant urge to fight back, insistent that death cannot be the end is found deep within us all.

But just because some people can't believe that death is the end and just because they pray doesn't make them right. Outrage and passion does not of itself alter reality. Having unlimited optimism doesn't make something come true – as millions of people who buy lottery tickets each week should know only too well. Having a deep sense in the guts that death cannot be

the end of it all, does not guarantee that life after death is a guarantee. As the graffiti writer put it 'Surely 100,000 lemmings can all be wrong'.

However, the longing and prayers of ordinary people does reflect something that is built into the very fabric of the world and which God has revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. For it is what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead, not our hopes and wishes, which is the basis of our conviction and assurance that death is not the end. As St Paul put it ¹⁷'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died* in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor 15. 17-19).

But you say 'ah, but it was differing 2000 years ago. They were unsophisticated people who lived in a superstitious age'. But when you read the gospels you find that is not the case. They didn't expect people to rise from the dead anymore that most people do today. Indeed, one of the most influential groups of people in those days, the Sadducees, had, as one of their cardinal tenets of their belief, that there is no resurrection. And the gospel accounts of full of surprise, puzzlement, disbelief (think of Thomas) – the disciples had scattered in fear. They weren't expecting resurrection. The astonishing truth took time to sink in.

In the Resurrection appearances in the Gospels there is both belief and unbelief, there is recognition and incredulity, there is conviction and hesitancy. The risen Jesus was both the same and yet he was transformed. The disciples were hesitant and wondered if was all too good to be true. The disciples on the Emmaus road did not recognise him until he broke the bread for them - and then he disappeared from sight. When they were having their breakfast by the lake, St John comments: 'None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?", because they knew it was the Lord' (John 21: 12).

It is because God had acted decisively in history in raising Jesus from the dead that we can have hope. A hope that no one can surpress. It is interesting that after fifty years of state enforced atheism, Cuba has finally established a national holiday on Good Friday, two days ago. This reminds me of a true story. Those of you of my generation may remember Mervyn Stockwood, the colourful Bishop of Southwark, now long since dead. In his autobiography he describes visiting the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev era as part of a British parliamentary delegation. All religion was banned; atheism was promoted ruthlessly. Most churches were closed and many clergy were in prison for their faith.

Unfortunately Mervyn Stockwood had forgotten to pack his electric razor. With an important meeting on the agenda that morning, he had no choice except to go the salon in the hotel to be shaved. There he discovered two barbers, one male, the other female.

The male barber already had a customer. The bishop was enthusiastic for sex equality and a supporter of the ordination of women, but to sit helpless in a barber's chair with a large Russian lady wielding a cut-throat razor required a special act of faith. He took a chance.

Soaping his beard, and with cut-throat razor in hand, the woman suddenly stopped shaving him and looked intently at him, and at his pectoral cross and episcopal ring. She went across and spoke to the other barber who asked him through an interpreter whether he was a bishop. It was Eastertide and the Russian Orthodox Church, perhaps more than other churches, celebrates the resurrection with great gusto.

Suddenly, clutching his pectoral cross in her hand, she kissed it fervently, and then his bishop's ring. Then raising the razor aloft, still covered with soap and stubble, she called out, 'Christos vezscriten!' 'Christ is risen.' Whereupon the other customers waiting their turn, put

down their copies of Pravda, shouted in reply in Russian, 'He is risen indeed'. Can you imagine that happening up in the men's barber in the High Street in St Albans?

Later that day, Bishop Mervyn Stockwood confided to his diary, 'Poor old Brezhnev. Sixty years of atheism and still the Galilean conquers!'

The Galilean was raised from the dead and still today the Galilean does indeed conquer and we are all beneficiaries of his victory. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a truth no one can quash. There is nothing to fear. Death has indeed been defeated. May that hope and that joy infect our witness to Jesus Christ this Easter.

Amen.