

Easter

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 24 April 2011.
The readings for Easter Day were Acts 10:34-43, Colossians 3:1-4, St John 20:1-18.*

In 1944, the French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre penned a play that is short but certainly not sweet. *Huis Clos*, published in English under the title *In Camera*, should not be seen or read on one of those evenings when you need cheering up.

It focuses on three people who are condemned to each other's company. They are in a locked room. There is no escape. There is no sleep. They cannot even close their eyes. Through their words, their looks, their silences, their very presence, each is the torturer of the others.

The worst thing is, this situation of mutually inflicted suffering is destined to continue eternally. There will be no release. They are sentenced forever to that room, lumbered forever with each other, frozen forever into their abrasive relationships, limited forever to the horizon of here and now. It is a situation of unmitigated hopelessness, unredeemed despair.

In the play's closing moments, one of the three muses: "So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture chambers, the fire and brimstone Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is ... other people!" This dawning realization produces hysterical laughter. Then a long silence. "Well," says one of them, "let's get on with it ...". Curtain. End of play.

The Jesus drama could well have ended on a similar note. A grim "Well, let's get on with it" from a small group of his demoralized followers, men and women who had lost their leader, their confidence, their future, their dreams. People cringing in a locked room, fearing a hostile world, reacting to each other's follies and foibles, united only by a shared misery, until their sad little movement was washed from the face of the earth by the tides of history.

Yes, it might well have ended that way. One might reasonably have expected it to end that way. A couple of Easters ago, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a Michael Leunig cartoon. It showed three crosses on a hill, and in the foreground two Roman soldiers. "Look at that," says one admiring soldier, pointing towards the cross in the centre. "Brilliant!" he says. "You kill the leader and you nip the whole movement in the bud".

But that's not what happened.

Instead, the small band of Jesus' followers became convinced, with astonishing speed and unanimity, that the cross had not been the end; that the divine life they had glimpsed in him was stronger than all the forces of sin and death; that God's redeeming purpose could not be thwarted; and that they themselves were called to celebrate and proclaim the dawning of this astounding new day.

Their mood was not despair, but extraordinary confidence. Their horizon was not the here and now, but the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. Those few men and women got on with it, right enough, but with an Easter-inspired joy and vitality that was to send the Church out through the nations and down through the centuries with a message destined to turn the world upside down.

Today's readings take us back to that beginning. Back to Peter's summary of Easter faith in the Acts of the Apostles: God sent this man, God was with this man; they killed him but God raised him; and we have witnessed both his living and his rising. Back to the exhortation to those early Christians in Colossae: if you have been raised with Christ, live accordingly. Back to Mary Magdalene's breathless words to the apostles: "I have seen the Lord!"

That conviction was what set the early Christians off and running. Quickly, their numbers grew. The Jesus movement had taken off. Not because of a clever management plan. Not as a result of some smart advertising. Not due to any perfectly honed doctrines or brilliant orators. Not even – I regret to have to tell you – thanks to any exemplary church music! No, what sparked that explosion of faith was their astonished belief that Christ had risen. Nothing less.

The same conviction still drives the church today. Even when the world seems dead against us.

Nicolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a leading ideologist in the early days of the Soviet Union. He took part in the 1917 revolution, served on the Soviet Politburo, edited Pravda, and eventually died in one of Stalin's purges. The story is told that, in 1930, he addressed a huge anti-God rally, a so-called "reeducation assembly", in the city of Kiev. He spoke powerfully and at length, ridiculing Christianity until it seemed nothing could remain of Russia's ancient faith.

Confident that he'd done his job, Bukharin invited questions. A man stood, surveyed the great crowd, then uttered the old Easter greeting: "**Christos anesti!**" -- "**Christ is risen!**" Back thundered the response of the people: "**He is risen indeed!**"

[Come to think of it, that's an Easter response we should know, and use, here at St Stephen's. You'll hear it today in Orthodox, Roman Catholic and some other Protestant churches too. Let's say it: **Christ is risen!**]

The world's opposition is not the only factor that can weigh heavily against the possibility of Christian faith. Sometimes the church itself seems to weigh pretty heavily too.

A century ago relationships between the divided churches were appalling. Simply disastrous. Some far-sighted people started praying, and talking, and thinking, and working, for an end to these scandalous divisions. The result has been one of the most astonishing movements for renewal that the church of Jesus Christ has ever known, a movement of which our Uniting Church in Australia is of course one of the products.

Those pioneers fell in love with a hymn that was to become the marching song for their movement. They could have chosen a song lamenting the sad divisions of Christ's people. That would certainly have been appropriate. But they didn't. They might have opted for a song stressing their resolve to work with all their strength for reform. They didn't do that either.

Instead, they latched on to an Easter hymn written in 1923 by a Swiss pastor, Edmond Louis Budry: “A toi la gloire, o Ressuscite!” We’ll sing it in English translation as our final hymn: “Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory, thou o’er death hast won”.

That’s the conviction that put fire into the feet of our ecumenical pioneers. Not a negative deploring of the status quo, though it deserved deploring. Not even a positive aspiration to fix things, though things certainly needed fixing. What drove them on, through success and failure, in good times and bad, when the task looked easy and when it seemed absolutely impossible, was their confidence in God’s life-giving, history-bending victory in Christ.

The Anglican communion has a special religious community, rather like the Benedictine order in the Roman Catholic Church, called the Community of the Resurrection. Members of the Community of the Resurrection have made an impact out of all proportion to their small numbers, especially in South Africa, producing outstanding leaders like Trevor Huddleston and Desmond Tutu. I admire them.

But I’m slightly jealous of them too, especially for their name. For, in truth, the label belongs to all followers of Christ. Rightly understood, every congregation – yes, including us, right here at St Stephen’s -- is part of God’s amazing, world-challenging, joy-filled community of the resurrection. So, my friends, let us by God’s grace be what we are.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God.

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