Easter Sunday St Ninian’s Cathedral 080412

It’s good that we share in Harrison Marc’s baptism on this Easter Day – a traditional time for baptisms and for renewal of baptismal vows because we are ‘baptised into the death of Christ that we may walk with him in the newness of his risen life.’

New life in the birth of a child. New life in brightness, flowers and music. Easter matches the mood of a world coming back to birth – our Easter Eggs symbolise either new life or the stone rolled away from the tomb.

The world has changed out of all recognition in this generation. A recently-published book is called Religion is back [2009]. Religion and politics are intertwined across the world – most notably in the growth of Islam. Recently we see reports of the strength of the Moslem Brotherhood in the politics of the new Egypt. At home too, faith is on the agenda as our society deals with difficulty moral issues like Assisted Dying and Same Sex Marriage. The hostility towards faith which some identify is I believe reducing. Indifference certainly – but also in many who recognise that the values on which our society has been built have not stood the test of time and that something new and better is needed. Here we turn the life of our congregations in the direction of mission and engagement. We meet people who are not excited by churches as institutions but who are exploring faith, value and meaning in life. Yes religion is back.

But what does it mean to say ‘Christ is risen – he is risen indeed Alleluia’

It is the ultimate faith statement. Do I believe it? Yes I do. But why? Maybe the empty tomb. But for me - people – particularly the new courage of the disciples. But it clearly wasn’t just a nice idea – or a ‘so that’s all right then’ revival of Jesus. Mary didn’t recognise him – indeed only recognised him when he used her name. Yet the encounter was life-changing and it turned the disciples from a group of inward-looking and apprehensive people into a brave missionary group who were ready to take on the world. They learned the truth by living it and so must we.

Yes I believe it . And I believe that the pattern of death overwhelmed by the power of new life is the way in which faith looks at the world. There isn’t much difficulty finding death in our world today. I don’t just mean the violence which is so characteristic of today – and rooted for example in the sectarianism pressures of Scotland. There is a culture of anger in our politics – a culture which divides people into economic winners and losers – it’s sharpened by economic hardship. It speaks of the death of trust and goodwill. My reading of the advice columns and my daily contact with people reminds me of how helpless we are to prevent the death of relationships.

It isn’t always easy to declare resurrection faith in the middle of all that. When I was a parish priest, I used to listen to myself speaking at the funerals of my parishioners, people I had known and loved for many years … listen to myself doing as the church always does .. standing in the presence of death and declaring resurrection life. I find a clue in the faces of some of the wonderful elderly people I have known – lined faces which tell the story of the years, of loss and sadness – yet the same lined faces express an inner beauty and vitality which transcends death and loss. I think of the risky endeavour of offering hope, relationship and forgiveness across the chasms of hurt and recrimination – so easily rebuffed and yet not because what is on offer is life itself. This is ultimately about believing that Easter is the point at which God’s will and action came through the fabric of things and makes possible a new kind of reconciled love.

That’s why I see the resurrection gospel as hope in the midst of despair – as declaring that God is always present with his people. And I experience it as an attitude to life which is expressed in our baptism. We carry death, loss and fear with us. We learn the resurrection faith by living it. So we live, speak and act in a way which overwhelms all pain and loss with with hope-filled joy.