

# All Saints Alive

## READER'S VIEWPOINT

### Easter is 'who we are'

**Geoffrey Oates explains**

Yes, this is the Easter edition of the Parish Magazine, but I wonder when you will actually be reading it? Still in Lent? Palm Sunday perhaps, or one of the days of Holy Week? I can only guess where you will be up to in the great drama of Passiontide.

The seasons of northern Europe give us a ready-made image for Easter. After the wintertime of Lent, with its darkest hours on the Thursday evening in Gethsemane and the agonies of Good Friday, spring bursts forth in glorious sunshine, accompanied by all those natural symbols of rebirth – colourful spring flowers, new-born lambs, chickens hatching from their eggs. That last symbol would perhaps have kept more of its power if we had not coated it quite so thickly in chocolate!

I write at the end of a bright sunny Saturday afternoon, having done my best to spend some time in the open air. The weatherman promises a cold snap, and possibly, snow tomorrow. In reality, the weather does not snap from winter to spring on any given day, we live in an unpredictable, but inescapable cycle of wet and dry, warm and cold, and a vague confidence that summer will come eventually, even in England.

The historical narrative of Passiontide has a similar roller-coaster feel, especially if you follow St John's version. The prelude is the story of the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus. We move from deep grief to unimagined hope. Then comes Palm Sunday, the heady optimism of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the crowds firmly behind him. But something goes wrong, and as the week goes by treachery and disaster dominate the stage. In Gethsemane Jesus weeps again,

and on Friday all seems lost. By Sunday the cycle is complete and our joy is restored – but on a strange and profoundly higher plateau.

Real life is never quite as neat and tidy, but we know that ups and down, highs and lows crash together in patterns we can hardly make sense of. Our Christian calendar acknowledges this. Even in the reflective calm of Lent, weekly celebrations of the Resurrection punctuate our sobriety (in its broadest sense). Every Sunday is a little Easter, and partying is permitted! It is worth knowing that in the traditions of Jewish and early Christian religious observance, a Holy Day begins at nightfall of the preceding day – so even the strictest observer of Lent could still risk a night on the town on a Saturday night! For the mathematically minded among you, that is also the reason why Lent always runs for six and a half weeks but is only 40 days long – the Sunday's aren't really in Lent at all!

I have an early childhood memory of a brilliantly sunny Easter Sunday morning, and my mother choosing a moment in the garden, before we went to Church, to tell us that our poorly Aunt Brenda was in fact on the verge of death. I was perhaps too young to understand what she meant by the words 'Jesus wants her' (though they stick so firmly in my mind even now), but I remember the irony of my elder sisters sitting crying through the minister's festive sermon. On Easter Sunday morning, my family found itself back in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It can work the other way round as well. The International Methodist Church in Munich, our home for several years in the late 90's,

was frequented by many African refugees. Their struggles to establish their right to asylum, and their fear of deportation, were constant pastoral concerns. But in the meantime they contributed fully to the life of the Church and Bertram, from Nigeria, was a gifted lay preacher and youth leader. Though a policeman, he had incurred the displeasure of Nigeria's military dictatorship, and had escaped from death row! There isn't space here for the details.

Fearing that the risk of his deportation was growing, the congregation arranged him a place of study at Cliff Theological College near Sheffield and put up the money for fees and living costs, so that Bertram could apply for a student visa for the UK. Before the visa was issued, Bertram was called to the local Immigration office to 'renew his temporary residence permit'. The police were waiting for him, and he was taken to the local remand prison where he was served with a deportation order and taken to a cell until travel arrangements to Nigeria could be made.

Tense days passed as we pulled every string we knew of to get his UK visa issued in time. I don't know if God is into melodrama, but on Maundy Thursday the border police had already collected Bertram from his cell when the prison chaplain came racing down the corridor waiving a British visa.

The news reached us as our congregation gathered that evening for the washing of feet and a 'Gethsemane' vigil. But suddenly the timetable of Passiontide made no sense to us anymore. As darkness fell on the eve of Good Friday, Easter came bursting through and Resurrection was a present reality to us all.

And that, of course, is exactly as it should be. No liturgical timetable can shelter us from the times of sorrow and grief, because they are part of the human condition that Jesus shared with us, and by sharing it, sanctified it. But neither can any timetable hold back the radiant joy of God's children in the ever-present wonder of his Resurrection.

Easter is always with us. We are the Easter people. Easter is the defining condition of our lives.

So whatever day you are reading this, Happy Easter! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

## **Understanding and using the Bible**

- What is the Bible?
- What makes it special to many people?
- What kind of authority does it have?
- Is there a big story in the Bible?
- What are its main themes?
- How do we read the various kinds of books in the Bible?
- How do we fit together the stories and teaching in different parts of the Bible?
- What tools and resources will help us make sense of the Bible?
- What role does the Bible play in our own lives and in our churches?
- How can we interpret it responsibly?
- How has it been misused, and how can we avoid this?
- How can we make connections with contemporary issues?
- How can we encourage others to engage with the Bible?

These questions, and more, are addressed in a course run at Hertford Baptist Church. The six week course explores questions central to our life as Christians. Whether the Bible is familiar or something new, this course will help you learn more from reading the Bible, understand its message and apply it to contemporary issues.

The course tutors are Geoffrey Williams, Associate Lecturer, Spurgeon's College, Bob Hunt, Senior Tutor, All Nations Christian College. £20 for the course (£10 if unwaged).

The course runs on Thursdays 7.45-9.45 p.m. 19<sup>th</sup> April to 24<sup>th</sup> May. To book call Hertford Baptist Church 01992 582951 or email: [theoffice@hertfordbaptist.org.uk](mailto:theoffice@hertfordbaptist.org.uk)