

Evensong: 1 April 2018: Easter Day

On the 3rd March a young Russian woman flew from her home in Moscow to visit her father in the United Kingdom. He had been living here for over ten years and his daughter was not an infrequent visitor to these shores. The following day, a Sunday, they had lunch together and, enjoying a little bit of early spring sunshine, went to a nearby park whereupon they both displayed some noticeably strange behaviour. Found slumped on a park bench, emergency services were called; it later transpired that they had been poisoned; thus began a string of events that has led to the expulsion of hundreds of Russian diplomats from around the world and, as we speak, tit for tat reprisals from the Russians. And all this emanated from Salisbury, the first time since 1258, when the cathedral was completed, that anything had happened in the city.

Yulia Skripal is a known critic of Vladimir Putin, but it was her father, a former spy working for the West, who was probably the intended target of the nerve gas attack. The deliberate attempt to kill a British citizen on British soil is what sparked the diplomatic crisis before us. But at its heart are two victims of a heinous crime. For just under four weeks Yulia, like her father, has been in critical condition. Unlike her father, on Friday she woke up, and is now sitting up in bed, conscious and talking.

On 23 March, Julie, a mother of two went to work at her local supermarket in Trèbes, in south-west France, where she worked on the checkout. At about 11am, an armed man burst into the supermarket claiming he was a soldier of Islamic state. He had previously hijacked a car from nearby Carcassonne, killing the passenger and seriously wounding the driver, and had fired at soldiers leaving a military barracks. He killed a customer in the supermarket before taking Julie hostage. A local gendarme, Arnaud Beltrame, offered himself in exchange for Julie, and in the ensuing storming of the supermarket by French security forces, the terrorist was killed and Beltrame was found seriously wounded. He later died in hospital. Julie fully realises that this could have been her.

On a different tack entirely, a cricket match was being played in South Africa last weekend when it was discovered that the Australian opponents were using sandpaper to roughen up the ball, thus making it susceptible to inverse swing. In short, they were cheating. In the brouhaha that followed, the Australian prime minister vilified his players for the national shame they had brought upon their nation, and the Australian cricket captain. Steve Smith, was stripped of the captaincy and banned from playing for the national team for a year. He was sent home, alongside two other players. At a news conference at Sydney airport, Smith faced the scrutiny of a press pack relishing in the downfall of a once confident, assertive player. Smith said at the press conference that before you do anything stupid and wrong just think of the effect this will have on the people you love, and then broke down as

he knew just how much hurt he had caused his mother and his father. His dad, just behind him at the conference, touched his shoulder in that loving, supportive and forgiving way that only parents can offer to their children. At that moment, Steve Smith realised he couldn't get away with saying that it's only a game. Mind you, no-one, as far as anyone could tell, had died.

At the beginning of the year, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, was worth \$61.3 billion. Last week he is only worth \$51.0 billion. Poor man. Now he knows what it feels like to be Unfriended.

A loose collection of people you may think, and not much unites them. Yet all have been in the news for very different reasons in recent weeks, and all of them would rather not be in the place they are in at the moment. Life has a habit of casting nasty surprises on you at distinctly inopportune moments, and no matter what pathways all these four people felt they were on, things look quite different for them now.

Most of, I guess, see our lives as a linear pathway, from birth to death, in which we are born, are nurtured, develop our own personality and view of the world, reach some form of physical peak, and then gently (and, in some cases, not so gently) get older, and eventually slip away into death. We have a path before us, parts of which we choose to go down, some others because we feel that is the right thing to do. We count ourselves fortunate if we can continue down this path without too much going wrong. I am sure that Yulia Skripal, Julie, Steve Smith and Mark Zuckerberg all thought that life was proceeding on its course relatively smoothly, before these out of the blue things happened to them.

I also guess that most of us see our faith being mapped onto this relatively smooth trajectory. So, as we develop, we may learn a few Bible stories, we may be confirmed, even making a commitment to Jesus, and dedicate ourselves to some form of Christian ministry or, at least, church-going. And if we are good and faithful, and don't do anything too drastic, we may get the reward of everlasting life at the end of it all. Resurrection is something that *may* happen to us when we die. And if anything comes along to upset the applecart *en route*, whether of our own making or because we are in the wrong place at the wrong time, well, we have to hope that not too much serious damage has been done.

The trouble with this model of life and faith, though, is that it makes very little allowance for God. For, if we think that resurrection is something that happens at the end of our lives, then all God becomes *during* our lives is some sort of umpire – to keep with the cricketing analogy – ensuring that we keep playing fairly and squarely, occasionally pointing out where we have gone wrong. Only at the end will God give his judgment, and by then, of course, it's too late.

But this is not what the resurrection is about. Yes, there is a linear feel to our lives, from birth to death, but actually our lives are not lived in a linear fashion. In fact, our lives, at any one moment, are a myriad different sensations, thoughts and emotions as we experience pain and pleasure, joy and anxiety depending on what we are doing or who are with at any given moment. We can have money worries and at the same time experience the wonder and amazement of human creativity in art or music. Our relationships aren't a succession of calculations that I arrange in order to get me to where I want to be, using this person for that end in order to progress my life, un-friending them when they cease to be useful; they are the spontaneous, challenging and loving blessings we have very little control over, expanding, as they do, our understanding of the world and its people in ways that my single-minded, singularly purposeful view of life could never begin to emulate.

And radiating through this delightful dance of life – for our lives are more like dances than a trudge from birth to death – is the irradiant presence of God in Jesus Christ. Intersecting every moment of our lives is the possibility of God, in the here and now, not as something that has to wait for an indefinable future, but as an immediate and possible now. Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God. Paul calls it a new creation. We call it Resurrection. They are one and the same thing, and that one and the same thing is all about the potential to take us beyond the limits of our experience and our knowledge to what may lie beyond.

For Julie it is perhaps the awareness that everything she is – wife, mother, shopworker, someone who narrowly escaped death – has become focussed by the terror of that event, and how she responds to that focussing will tell her about how her future may be shaped, a life made more potentially alive simply because it nearly ended on that Friday morning at that checkout. For Arnaud Beltrame's family it is the knowledge that their beloved husband and father in that instant took a decision that meant that their own future will need a radical adjustment if it is going to have meaning and scope. What is life going to be like without him? And for Beltrame himself there was the split-second decision that said 'I am offering my life for hers.' No weighing up of the consequences. No time to think. And in the sacrifice came the fulfilment that 'this is what my life has been leading to.' This does not mean there are easy solutions in the wake of an awful event: faith and Resurrection do not supply ready-made answers to the questions that life throws up: we may well face our Yulia Skripal, our Julie, even our Steve Smith moments, at serene times of our lives that place our preconceived ideas about God and the people we love in the balance. But faith and Resurrection are *there*, because God irradiates the world with his immediate and loving presence.

For everyone, then, there is, at every single moment, the radiant possibility of Resurrection to, if not make sense of that moment, then at least to see that beyond the full stop of this particular encounter, there is the understanding that there will

always be something else, something new, something not previously anticipated. What may appear to be a full stop is merely a comma. Life, resurrection life, is not overcome by our limitations and our death, but is a gateway into the greater reality of God himself. That reality is here and now. It is our constant companion on the road to Emmaus and every other destination we are heading towards. And neither a scuffed cricket ball or a nerve agent on a car door can ever stop it.

After the darkness comes the dawn. Love overcame
Emerging from a cold tomb
All the truth, majesty and creativity of a living God
Transforming a broken heart
Making a quiet return, in a still and sorrowful garden
The grave stone rolled away, to release redemptive love
Jesus resurrected and restored
Comforts a weeping woman
Speaks with travellers on a journey
Meets with his faithful friends
And they bow down before Christ alive
And acknowledged that the saviour has arrived
That the word of God has come alive
And that the extraordinary transformation of heaven and earth
Is complete.