

## Daniel's reflection for week beginning April 2nd – Find your own Calcutta

*In preparing to commemorate the Resurrection, we should, rather than pursue a private line to God, be asking some very public questions about our personal life choices, such as what we buy, how we vote, how simply we live, our sense of solidarity with others.*

Cusco, city of the Inca gods, is perched on a plateau of the Peruvian Andes. The people of the city, ever ready to party, will soon be celebrating Easter with gusto. They are famous for it. Huacaypata, Cusco's square, is always full of vibrant colour and the sound of music. But in South America I also discovered a less glamorous reality – the poverty of these same people that is more in tune with Lenten fasting than Easter rejoicing. I stayed with the Missionary Society of St James the Apostle, a group of priests from England, Ireland and the USA that endeavours to build basic communities of compassion with the destitute families in the slums and deserts in their huge parishes in Ecuador and Peru. It is, I discovered, another way of being church.

The priests I met here are worried about the exploitation of natural resources, the quality of life, the building of self-respect, the restoring of a voice to voiceless people. They are clearly not impressed by what they called a 'telephone spirituality' – me and God on a private line where I can save my soul without leaving the house. Their mission statement, rather, is about identifying the ways we are called to complete the Passover of Jesus in the relentless pursuit of justice and freedom for every person and for creation itself. . .

While I was there, Gustav Gutierrez, the champion of liberation theology, gave a seminar on the 'human face of Jesus; the divine face of humanity'. The title tells it all. Trapped behind the bars of utter powerlessness, (but with limitless potential for development), impoverished people are witnesses, as Pope Benedict emphasised in Brazil in n2007, of the essence of God's presence. For them, Resurrection carries a very earthy and practical context. There is always the temptation to shrink and spiritualise the horizons of Matthew 25. For those who are trapped in the tightening net of a merciless exploitation. Easter must be a liberating experience to be lived before it becomes a liturgy to be celebrated.

I left Lima with uneasy thoughts. To what extent have we in the West grasped the naked truth revealed by a God who was fleshed into the condition of oppression and persecution? And, do we still substitute membership of an institution for the painful personal and communal dying which is the only way to establish and purify the Kingdom of God on earth? For whom, in all honesty, is our preferential option made?

Many Lenten readings focus on the challenging realities of Jesus humanity – God in the distressing disguise of the anguished anawim: the poor of the Lord. Only within the flawed flesh does redemption happen. There is no other place for healing and hurt to meet, for grace and sin to embrace, for a damaged beauty to be restored. Salvation is crafted in the workshops of poor peoples' lives and rich peoples' greed. It is extraordinary how often, in our originally sinful myopia, we mistake a universal call to save the world for the private pursuit of individual bliss in heaven.

There is another profound point to be emphasized in co-creating a better world with God. We do not all need to be missionaries in faraway places. 'Find your own Calcutta,' St Theresa of Calcutta said to those who complained that India was too far away. There are many shanty-town kingdoms to be built around us, wherever we live, beginning with the one in our own heart. It is not about doing great things in foreign lands, she said, but about doing ordinary things with great love. This is what murdered martyr Blessed Oscar Romero wrote: 'How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their job is a priestly work, that just as I celebrate Mass at this altar, so each carpenter celebrates Mass at his workbench, and each metalworker, each professional, each doctor with the scalpel, the woman at her market stand, is performing a priestly office!' . . .

And, still echoing in my heart as we approach Holy Week, is Romero's mighty paean to the Risen Christ – a personal Exultet that keeps a light in the eyes of those I visited in Peru. Two weeks before his assassination, and clearly anticipating his fate, he exclaimed in his final interview: 'I do not believe in death but in the Resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people.'

(Unmasking God pp38-40)