

## Easter Sunday

## Idle tales

*Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12*

The film Conclave, on the face of it, seems an unlikely subject for one of the best films of the year. From the 2016 Robert Harris novel it's about a lot of old men voting. So far, so uninteresting. Until you factor in that the old men are cardinals, gathered together in Rome, seeking to elect a new pope.

Conclave is a film about power struggles and morality and choices. It's about Church politics. It's about men's egos. It's about sin and redemption. It's about the past, and the present, and the future. It's about what churches are, what they're for, why they can still matter. Yes it's fiction, but the message of Conclave speaks powerfully about things that affect all churches today.

Cardinal Lawrence, the Dean of the College of Cardinals, organises the Conclave and makes all the arrangement. Listen out for his sermon. In their locked Sistine Chapel, where no outside interference can reach them, Cardinal Lawrence departs from his prepared sermon and says this:

*"There is one sin which I have come to fear above all others. Certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Our faith is a living thing, precisely because it walks hand-in-hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith. Let us pray that God will grant us a Pope who doubts.*

*And let Him grant us a Pope who sins and asks for forgiveness, and who carries on."*

It is a sermon for Easter Sunday as it speaks about what matters in faith, and doubt, and how we navigate between the two as we live our lives.

At a time of massive reorganisation within the Church of Scotland, and the draught of secularism being felt across our faith community it might seem ironic to suggest that our biggest fear should be certainty. Yet we see in the Church that desperate need for what we think we want, certainty, is more of a millstone than a stepping stone. "If only we could have all the answers in advance. If only all the boxes could be ticked. If only we could be absolutely sure of every possible outcome...." Then we could decide. Then we could make a commitment. Then we could plan ahead. Indeed, in Scripture there is advice given to people planning the building of towers and making sure they they've thought things through and got enough money.

The issue is our terrified need for 'certainty'. Oh, it is so perfectly understandable. When we are about to make a big commitment to do something or be something we like to be in control or possession of all the facts, so we can make an informed decision. The reality is that sometimes we do not have anything like all of the facts, and even if we did have them, they might not necessarily help us because 'things happen', 'unknowns impinge', and sooner or later we need to venture out in faith. Which is never an exercise in certainty. It is an exercise in trust, in aspiration, in hope. It has to do with God. Whenever we think we can be certain about Who God is, and what God is, and what God will do next, we have lost God.

When we deal with God, the Easter God, we need to factor in some uncertainty, some honest doubt, some genuine questioning, and some real trust. Do your homework, engage all your senses and intellect, but sooner or later there is going to be that moment when you have to step out, have to guess, have to place your lives into the divine hands of hope. And take heart, and trust.

A Church needs to be comfortable with its doubts as well as its faith. A Church will not know all of the answers. Who are we, like God? Of course not. But with enough of the answers, and enough of the courage to expose and explore our doubts that others might be beguiled by our honesty,

and encouraged by our openness, and challenged by our aspiration to reach out. They may get alongside us in search of things that will help, and practices that will give hope, and inclusion that will welcome in, and faith that will have enough doubt in it to keep on searching and questing and asking the questions because faith is a living and not a dead thing.

When I was ordained at 25, I knew absolutely everything. Now that I am 35...and then some – I am more comfortable at *knowing* far less but *believing* far more. I believe enough, and doubt enough, not only to look for the Easter God in the obvious, expected places, but also find myself frequently surprised by the Easter God in unexpected places, and from unexpected voices. For you, for me, this is the adventure of faith upon which we are all embarked.

Idle tales. The unexpected voices started on that first Easter morning, for it was with the women, and not with the men, that the story of the resurrection began to spread. Gossip? Idle tales? Or holding a kernel of the great truth that with all its incredible mystery lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It is this: somehow, Jesus is alive.

Going back to the book and film Conclave for a moment, we also find a woman who has to speak out bravely to be heard. Sister Agnes, a truly scary nun (all nuns are truly scary), knows what has been going on behind the scenes of the Conclave. *"A woman's voice! It was scarcely credible! The cardinals turned in shock to stare at the tiny, resolute figure of Sister Agnes advancing between the tables. The silence that fell was probably as much appalled at her presumption as curious at what she might say. "Eminences," she began, "although we Daughters of Charity...are supposed to be invisible, God has nonetheless given us eyes and ears..."*

Idle tales. Unexpected voices speaking of what they had seen and heard and, undaunted, speaking out to others who need to hear, and doubt, and believe. The discovery of the women that the tomb was empty, and Jesus risen, is told to the male disciples and repeated in the story of the

road to Emmaus later. An empty tomb itself is not a persuasive argument for the resurrection, it means that the body was not there. What mattered was the *experience* of the risen Jesus to the women, and later to the men, so that what seemed idle tales became, through surprising belief, the foundation of Christian faith. "Matters of faith are never finally *proven*, nor faith generated by an incontrovertible argument. Faith is communicated by witness..."<sup>ii</sup> For these prominent women, Mary Magdalen, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women (how many of them were there?), who had witnessed the crucifixion and the burial, and now the empty tomb, something had changed. Jesus in His ministry had included and taught them, not just the men. These women were disciples too. They remembered what Jesus had taught them: that He would rise from the dead. Remembering is often the activating of the power of recognition. They remembered what they had heard, and something changed within them, and they believed, and they went out not only to tell the good news, but to live it because this Easter good news transformed not just their faith but confirmed their actions of loving kindness that had already marked their lives.

Easter, and its idle tales, is a story of faith. Faith, by definition, is never really 'proven.' Faith is lived; it is alive. Even in times of death and doubt, it is a seed hidden in the soil waiting for fruition. Faith calls us not to look for the living amongst the dead, but for the living amongst the living. Jesus is not buried in a long-ago-past. He is alive and active today, in faith communities and in the lives of individuals across the world who, despite, or because of, the idle tales, chip steadily away at the world's cruelties and bigotries and injustices and disease.

In the faith and doubt of these idle tales the world and individual lives are transformed to make a different.

The author Hilary Mantel has written: "...*history is not the past. It's the record of what's left on the record. It's the plan of the positions taken, when we stop the dance to note them down. It's*

*what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it - a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth.”*<sup>iii</sup>

This Easter morning all we have are a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth, and idle tales. But it has been from these, and is still from these, that something unstoppable and magnificent and transformative has emerged, the resurrected Spirit of Jesus Christ, healing and comforting, moving and loving us and our world into new life, again and again and again.

Believe.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Harris, *Conclave*, p227

<sup>ii</sup> Fred B Craddock, *Luke*, p281

<sup>iii</sup> Hilary Mantel, 2017 Reith Lectures, in *A Memoir of My Former Self*, p244