

2023 Assembly Lenten Reflections: Week 6: New Life

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Nelson Mandela in the *Long Walk to Freedom* reflects: 'There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged, to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.'

The first time I ever visited an Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe some 20 years ago, I found the darkness disorienting, the chanting disconcerting, the ritual unfamiliar, the incense and the many images an assault on the senses. The otherness alienated me. I found myself an outsider unable to enter into the experience. Rather, I, as is often our tendency when ushered into the unfamiliar, I kept a safe distance. I closed my mind's door rather than embrace the mystery and seek understanding.

I was relatively new in my walk with God then. I'd embraced my new life, but ask any midwife and they'll tell you birth is sometimes messy. There was no doubt I'd met Christ, but I also thought that along with him that I'd found all the answers. I was convinced that I somehow had a more excellent way of understanding and practising my faith with my tribe. That the "tradition" I'd entered into somehow was purer and untarnished by pages of church history books less proudly displayed.

Not long before the pandemic, I had the opportunity to retrace my step, no longer as a toddler in the faith. And I had a completely different experience. In fact, being graciously invited to celebrate mass with a whole group of Orthodox nuns was quite possibly my richest, most textural, most mysterious and, frankly, most beautiful experience of a church service that whole year. The sung harmonies, the fragrant incense, the chanting, the reverence, the genuflections and prostrations, the liturgy, the icons, the beauty for all senses, the lot.

And it's moments like these that it hits me hard. I'm reminded of just how much I've changed. How you and I have not just been birthed anew in Christ, but how we're also invited to grow up in him. And as I've grown, how my world has opened up, how Christ and how the Church has grown. How I find myself able to appreciate the rich tapestry of all that is the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. How every single one of us remains a work in progress. On a journey, not yet having arrived at the destination. The world might have been more explicable then. But it was also more plain, more rootless, more black and white, less tolerant, less mysterious and most definitely less beautiful.

So today, as we contemplate new life, as we approach Holy Week and Easter, I want to share with you one of my icons. It's a unique icon only produced in one copy that I conceived of and had commissioned with the help of an extremely talented iconographer friend. I like to call it "Christ the Risen Gardener". You can see it in the picture below. In your Bible, you can turn to read more about the Scriptures that inspired it in John chapter 20.

This is an icon which comes infused with ambivalence - imbued both with memories of a world that once was, while at the same time yearning for what can be. What Jewish faith calls 'tikkun olam', 'the repair of the world' - not just what happens one day when, but one

which speaks of the struggle for justice, healing, reconciliation, and new life. For making things right also in the here and now.

The icon also speaks of the dark night of the soul, when Mary Magdalene, crippled by unspeakable grief, had gone to the tomb to cry. Finding the tomb empty and the stone rolled away, she didn't quite know what to make of it all. In the bewilderment and disorientation that ensued, she manages a startled: "They have taken my Lord away... and I don't know where they have put him!" Of course, she was, understandably, suspecting grave robbery and desecration over resurrection, but the exchange that follows is beautiful in more ways than one. Meeting the Risen Christ, she mistakes him for the gardener!

I cannot help but wonder what it was like on that dark, starry and confusing night. Was he crouching in the dirt? Was he who had conquered death able also to make the earth spring to life again? Could he soften what was hardened? Could he make even the driest, most lifeless and stoniest of deserts bloom? Did he cradle a seedling, gently helping it reach for the light? Did this earthy Messiah have dirt under his nails? God himself, on bended knee, writing in the dust, as he had before while stones picked up in judgment and anger had fallen to the ground all around him. Was there something in his appearance, upon closer inspection, that made eternity shine through?

Or did it all make sense when he turned to her, called her by name and her heart sprung to new life at the sound of his voice? And she, grabbed a hold of him, and called out "Rabbouni"! This sure was no ordinary gardener!

Let us pray:

Jesus Christ, risen gardener of all creation,
dirty-handed Messiah,
meet us today,
speak our names,
bring healing and wholeness,
and kindle a resurrection fire in our hearts,
reach out your hands and heal our world,
gently turn the soil,
make the desert of our lives bloom,
and bring forth new life from the dust.
Amen.