

‘Saints: the facts are stranger than fiction!’

Sermon for All Saints Day 1st November 2020

by Mark Pilgrim

The big BBC 1 Sunday night series at the moment is ‘Roadkill’. It stars Hugh Laurie, Helen McCrory and a host of actors you might recognise from other TV programmes. It is written by David Hare, a vastly experienced playwright who has written for film and screen too. If you look at reviews of Roadkill, you will find mixed reactions. They all applaud the acting but some say Roadkill’s story, all about political scheming, is a little too far-fetched. Some reviews also say the dialogue and plot development are too ‘clunky’ for television: what works on stage doesn’t necessarily work for film and screen. What the reviewers seem to want is a little more fact and a little less fiction. Even in a fictional story, they want more ‘reality’.

This got me thinking about the relationship between fact and fiction in religious belief. On the one hand we say the story of Adam and Eve is a fictional account that nevertheless conveys truth about the relationship of God to the world, creatures and people of God’s Creation. On the other hand, there are facts about Christian faith that seem straight out of science fiction.

All Saints Day is a great opportunity to think about the facts of who reveals and reflects God most effectively in their lives. In many cases, according to the secular view, the evidence makes no sense. The facts are too strange. God appears in people with no claim to expertise, influence or power – and yet they change everything. God appears in people on the edge or even outside the Christian community - and they reflect more of the love of God in Christ than most regular believers ever do. We call such people ‘The Saints’. They reveal and reflect God is with us now. So, on this All Saints Day, let’s look at some of the people in whom God surprisingly appears and of whom it’s tempting to say, ‘You couldn’t make this up!’

Conceived before marriage, born to migrants, welcomed by itinerant night workers, discovered by star gazing foreigners, Jesus was born. The Word was made flesh and lived...in a northern backwater of which it could easily be asked ‘can anything good come?’

Minding their own business, plying their trade on waters full of danger, fishermen left their steady jobs and followed Jesus for three years, eventually forming a small band of women and men spanning the spectrum of political and personal diversity. This small band, incredibly, survived ostracism and persecution to become the largest and most widespread community of faith the world has ever known.

Helping it on its way was a zealous persecutor of the early Christian community. He met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and became, arguably, the most influential disciple in Christian history. He marked the transformation in his being by changing from Saul to Paul.

Coming from the edge in the 600’s was Hilda, a member of a royal household in Northumbria, who founded and led monasteries including both women and men run under the Celtic traditions of Christianity in the British Isles. When the King of Northumbria decided to merge Celtic and Roman Christianity, it happened at Hilda’s monastery at Whitby - where, much against the prevailing patriarchy of the times then and in the future, a woman was acknowledged as the authoritative leader.

Coming from a playboy lifestyle in the late 1100’s was Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone – otherwise known as Francis of Assisi. A more revolutionary life is hard to imagine. From high living teenage years to a life of absolute poverty and prayer, in which not only his life but the life of millions then and since have been turned upside down, Francis of Assisi – this wastrel young man from a hill top Italian town – may be the equivalent to the second millennium of Christianity to what Paul of Tarsus was to the first.

And so the histories go on. Accounts of, in the word’s terms, really surprising people in really surprising places emerging to reveal God’s presence in Creation and to reflect the enduring and vital significance of

Jesus' teaching to meaning making in human life. In his book 'Luminaries' Rowan Williams depicts how twenty people through the last two millennia have shone the light of Christ in a troubled world around them.

Fascinatingly, three of the twenty he chooses don't start out as Christians at all. They are all twentieth century Jewish women caught up in one of the deadliest plagues ever to affect the Earth – Nazism. Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum and Edith Stein were deep thinking people who responded to the trauma of the Holocaust in different ways. Hillesum and Stein died as nuns in concentration camps during the war. Weil died in this country in 1943, weakened by years of starving herself in solidarity with those across the world without food to eat themselves. Never baptised – again out of solidarity with people and things beyond Christian boundaries – Simone Weil nevertheless called herself 'Christ's captive'. A Christian luminary, indeed.

And so to the present. What story can we tell, on this All Saints Day, that is of a piece with what has come before – in which the appearance of Christ and Christian witness in fact is stranger than any work of contemporary fiction might allow? Try this:

In September 2019 the historian Tom Holland published *Dominion*, a book I have mentioned before. *Dominion* tells the story of Christianity and its influence on European and world civilisation. The book's thesis is that the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is the most influential, the key event to understanding how the world is today. Holland wrote the book as an observant bystander. He says from the outset that, having been brought up in the faith, it is not a faith he professes now: but the way he writes of the debt he owes to a faithful godmother in constantly modelling Christian faith and its world-subverting teaching 'The last shall be first and the first last' is both telling and moving. Then, this week, I opened up an email which included this item: 'Tom Holland: the preacher who brought me back to church'. I clicked on the link to find Tom Holland writing this:

'When I was writing my book *Dominion*: I went to a great variety of churches. (One) was in the village where I had grown up, Broad Chalke in Wiltshire. I attended a service in All Saints, the church where I had sung as a child in the choir, been married, and where my mother still worships.

The service was an early one, 8.30 maybe, and I went to it chiefly - I confess - to keep my mother company. I wasn't expecting much from it. I anticipated that the congregation would be scanty, the mood downbeat, the whole occasion depressing.

When we got there, my darkest suspicions seemed confirmed. There were ten or so people, huddled in the choir stalls where I had used to sing as a boy. Sitting there, waiting for the service to begin, it seemed I was a witness to the decline of the Church. Yet then something amazing happened.

R. S. Thomas, in one of his poems, writes of how once, "in the darkness that was about/his hearers, a preacher caught fire/and burned steadily before them/with a strange light." That was how it seemed to me. The preacher was the Revd Anna-Claar Thomasson-Rosingh. Everything she said that early morning seemed lit by a pentecostal fire. That morning I felt that something had descended on me - like a fire, like the dove.'

I know Anna-Claar. She moved to Salisbury Diocese from Bristol some five years ago. She, Tom Holland and all of us are part of the extraordinary community of Christian faith we celebrate this All Saints Day. Today we remember how God appears in surprising people, often located beyond the edge of all the world's and our own expectation. David Hare's writing, including *Roadkill*, may be criticised for the plots being far-fetched and needing to be more factual. In Christian faith, however, the fact of God's appearance in all kinds of people is stranger than any fiction. So, let's give thanks for all the saints, past and present and, perhaps to our surprise, look for God being revealed in and around us too. Amen.