

Sermon preached by The Right Reverend John Stroyan, Bishop of Warwick, at the funeral of Bishop Colin Bennetts on 23 July 2013

It is true, the Lord is risen. Luke 24.34

Cleopas and his companion, their eyes now opened, hurry back to the eleven and the others to tell them '*It is true, the Lord is risen*'. Then they told them what had happened on the road, how he had been with them and walked with them in their despondency and bewilderment but they didn't know he was with them. Their testimony was of God who both reveals himself and conceals himself. Sometimes called the Paschal Mystery, it surely accords with the experience of every honest Christian. We walk by faith not by sight. Cleopas and his companion would soon no doubt be experiencing - along with the apostles and early disciples - the *cost* of being a witness to the resurrection of Christ, or to use the New Testament word, a '*martyr*' to the resurrection of Christ.

I say this because I know that Colin did not want, *passionately* did not want the Church to hide from or refuse to face the sufferings of the real world around us and the not seeing of God in the face of this suffering. Nor did he want us to hide from the cost of discipleship in which we as Christians are called to make ourselves vulnerable for the Gospel's sake. It is not good enough for the Church or any of us as Christians to play it safe. It is not good enough, he said from this pulpit in his Installation sermon, for the Church simply to regurgitate theological clichés and refuse to engage intellectually with intelligent people who simply do not find the witness of the Church credible. Nor is it good enough for the Church to be or attempt to be a kind of 'moral majority' sitting in judgement on the lives of those around us. Nothing could be further from the divine call to servant ministry. Nor is it good enough for the Church of England to rely on our inherited status rather than the power of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is the Gospel. 'We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord'. This is the Gospel, the Gospel that Colin knew and preached and lived.

Colin was in these ways refreshingly and challengingly unreligious. He knew, as the Coventry Litany has reminded us, that the Church is not the community of the pious but of forgiven and forgiving sinners. We have this treasure in jars of clay. We *all* depend on the grace and the mercy of God. For freedom, Christ

has set us free. John the Dwarf, fourth century Egyptian Desert Father describes the cross of Christ as setting us free not only from the burden of self-recrimination (or guilt) but also from the burden of self-justification. To me, and I suspect to many of us, Colin's life expressed something of this freedom, a freedom *from* pomposity and self-importance, a freedom from religiosity and the need to justify himself, and a freedom *to* enjoy God, and people and that fullness of life that Jesus came to bring.

So to put 'refreshingly unreligious' another way, if the Christian vocation is to be fully human, to be alive with the life of Christ, Colin was deeply and engagingly and attractively human, that is alive with the life of Christ. This aliveness in Christ is *attractive*. It is not coercive or moralistic or religious. It *attracts*. As William Temple reminds us, in St. John's Gospel, Jesus actually says '*I am the beautiful shepherd*', (*kalos*). He does not say 'I am the morally good shepherd' (*agathos*). Colin has attracted many to Jesus Christ. Why? His humanity, humour and humility have all played a part. It is probable, or certainly possible, that these three words have the same root, which is to do with being earthed and not having an inflated or hubristic view of oneself.

He was, I am sure we would all agree, fun to be with. I experienced his mischievous sense of humour immediately I was appointed. First of all at a Press photo-call when he told me the word to say to put a smile on my face for the cameras. (Let the reader understand!). Then he invited me to a working lunch, asking me if I preferred 'Indian or Chinese?' I said 'Indian, would be great'. He said 'I know a very good Chinese'. So we went there. Thus teaching me as a new Bishop how to be both consultative and decisive!

Colin had a great gift of friendship. He had a way of making people feel good about themselves, and of believing in their God-given potential. I have been amazed at the number of people I have met who knew Colin in Oxford who have spoken so warmly of how he helped them to come to faith and or to grow in faith and discipleship. I had an email from a friend of mine, yesterday, who knew Colin in this Diocese who described Colin '*as someone with the extremely rare gift of making you feel you were the only other person in the world when he was with you.*' The fact that this Diocese, relatively small as it is, produced such a high proportion of senior appointments in the Church of England as Bishop or Dean in the last two years of his ministry may not be unconnected

with Colin's Christ-like attentiveness and encouragement. He knew that Christians are not simply human beings but human *becomings*, called to grow and to continue growing up into Christ. For Colin, the ministry of Bishop and clergy is about helping the people of God to discover and enter into all that God has for them and to give through them in mission. So, for Colin, frequent Diocesan initiatives from the centre was not the answer, it would only prevent local Christian communities growing up in their responsibility for local mission and the particular form that should take in each parish. Many clergy and people across the Diocese are profoundly grateful for the trust he placed in them.

Colin was convinced that we must be risk-takers, boundary crossers. To be involved in God's mission is to make ourselves vulnerable. He was so glad to be called to this Diocese and this Cathedral with its international inspiration and its particular charism and call to the boundary crossing ministry of reconciliation. Colin was deeply inspired by the ministry of the Canons for reconciliation here, Kenyon Wright before he came, and then while Bishop here, Paul Oestreicher, Andrew White and Justin Welby. He travelled widely with them to many countries, Germany with whom we have so many foundational links which continue to grow, and a language that Colin could speak; Iraq, the Holy Lands and Nigeria. With Andrew White he set up a Companionship Agreement with Archbishop Josiah and the Kaduna Diocese and Archbishop Mar Sewerios of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Holy Lands. The fruits of this international ministry are there to be seen in schools or farms or hospitals and churches in these countries and in the bridges built between peoples, not least Jewish-Christian-Muslim in the Holy Lands and Christian-Muslim in Nigeria.

Colin was clear that Christ belongs to the world not the Church. His international concerns were reflected in the House of Lords where he urged the House to understand better the religious issues that are integral to the Middle East, where he spoke strongly against the use of cluster bombs which kill so many non-combatants, where he spoke against sanctions in Iraq which always hit the poorest the hardest. Colin demonstrated that loving our neighbour is not just a local matter, it involves crossing boundaries of race of culture and of faith.

To return to Emmaus. The road to Emmaus is about the *unfolding* of God's truth. It is a journey into seeing and seeing that sometimes we don't see and that there is always, this side of heaven, more to see. As St Paul puts it, we are to *go on* letting ourselves be transformed by the renewal of our mind. Colin spoke to me often about his own unfolding theological journey, how he saw things differently now from how he used to see them at earlier stages of his ministry. We must search the Scriptures and listen to what the Spirit is saying to us *now*. Colin brought his prayerful evangelical heart and his considerable intellect and knowledge of New Testament Greek to this search and to this listening. What is the Spirit saying to us *now*? He said to me several times '*God is so much bigger than I had realised.*' In his farewell sermon he said. '*So what do I regard as the highlight of my time in Coventry? It is the ways in which I have seen God at work, and found him bigger than I had ever imagined.*' Colin demonstrated something of the spaciousness of God's love, the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of the love of God in Christ who calls us to welcome the stranger and to love our enemies. Colin encouraged us to live out that indiscriminate hospitality of the love of God in Christ.

In this Diocese, he gave honoured space for those with whom he disagreed, not least on the matter of the ordination of women, encouraging us all to recognise and honour the integrity of those Christians who understand things differently. Diversity is not an obstacle to unity but an essential dimension of it. He was used internationally in this role, often behind the scenes here in Coventry, to help Anglicans from different countries and continents to listen better to each other and together to God. He did much of this on behalf of Archbishop Rowan with the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin, whose appointment gave Colin very great joy.

Finally, Veronica, you wrote movingly of the death of your 'beautiful and brave husband'. Yes, beautiful and brave. His life attracted so many to Christ and he was brave, brave in his ministry and brave in facing death. Many of us might say that of you too, Veronica. In the wonderful and extraordinary economy of God, in the midst of all that has happened that you would never have chosen, in the last 22 months of Colin's illness, you have told me Veronica, that there has been hidden blessing. You and Colin have been able truly to *be* with each other in love, valuing each day as gift and recognising afresh that your vocation

to marriage has been at the heart of your and Colin's vocation to ministry. The fruitfulness of Colin's ministry has been significantly a gift of your 47 years of life together and your life together in Christ. He has been so blessed by you and your partnership in the Gospel, your love and the love of all the family

Colin's life, in the beautiful phrase you used, did indeed 'sing the resurrection'. Why? Because he knew Christ and made Christ known.

+John 23-07-13 Coventry Cathedral