

Colossians 3:12-17: Putting on Christ.

During my three decades in ministry I've encouraged many people to be Jesus, to play the part of Jesus in the Gospel of the Passion, to put on Christ.

I've gone for the conventional choice, a retired priest, severely afflicted with church-voice-itis, who made Jesus sound so very very churchy, 'Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

But more often than not, I've gone for the unconventional choice, even sought my Jesuses from outside the church family, and have been surprised and heartened. I recall a consultant neurologist, whose skill as a brain surgeon had rescued so many people, brought so many people back from the brink. He told me how once he had sat up through the night with his toddler grandson. The toddler had banged his head, as toddlers are wont to do, 'He'll be fine,' the GP had said. But his grandfather had sat up beside his cot through the night, watching for signs, signs of life, signs of death. He made me think of God the Father watching each and every one of us through our dark nights, desiring life, willing life in all its fullness. He made me think of God the Father watching his son through his dark night, watching him die. He played Jesus very straight, a very humble, quiet voice: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'

I once asked our GP to be Jesus, an unusual doctor who sought healing for his patients by encouraging them to join his poetry group. Poetry on the NHS! This poetic doctor, who had seen many births and many deaths, was strangely moved and moving when he acted the part of this ultimate death. As soon as Jesus died his bleeper went off and he rushed out to attend an urgent case.

Another time I asked the local butcher to be Jesus, which shocked my middle class congregation no end. I've spent a lot of my time hanging around butchers' shops, I like talking to butchers who always seem to have a wisdom of their own. We have a lot in common. They feed the world with meat whilst I feed the world with Christ. John's Gospel has Christ dying at the very moment that the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in the temple. My butcher friend would have seen a lot of lambs die, I felt he was well qualified to play the Lamb of God in his final fatal hours. He played him beautifully, again softly spoken, with his natural Yorkshire inflections, 'My God, my God, why hast forsaken me?' Not long after playing Jesus to everyone's surprise he left his butchering and trained for ordination. Playing Jesus can do some funny things to you.

We had the village carpenter play Jesus in my first parish. He took a break from carving his replacement windows and dining room furniture to carve himself an imaginary cross and be crucified before our eyes. His Jesus was so gentle, so tender, as if he was sawing, planing, sanding carefully carving

death itself unfolding it before our eyes, as if it was his greatest work, no longer a thing to be feared.

Shockingly I have asked two women to play Jesus. When a cathedral in New York featured a woman, Christa, on the cross, people were outraged, as if crucifixion only happened to men. One of my female Jesuses was a lawyer. In the Gospels lawyers attack Jesus at every turn. This Palm Sunday we bucked the trend because a lawyer was Him, a young mother, blond, Aryan, a joyful Jesus even unto death.

The other woman was a Christ figure if ever there was one, a German teacher at our local school, her mother a Christian, her father a hindu, with a bronzed Indian skin. She was a brilliant Jesus and a brilliant teacher, always reconciling, soothing, healing.

At the time she was Jesus we had a group from Germany on exchange at the school, and so I got them to act the other parts. The German Physics teacher carried off Judas rather well, with his ‘Ze one I shall kiss iz der man! Sieze him and lead him away safely!’ A little girl who was a Russian German brought tears to my eyes and her voice will haunt me until the day I die: she read the part of the crowd on Palm Sunday with her plaintiff cry, ‘Hosianna, Hosianna, blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord.’

There was a pathos there of Mother Russia intensity which opened a chill door and let Good Friday in on Palm Sunday. Another year we had a newly qualified English teacher, a young man whom all the Year 10 girls fancied. His Jesus was very fast, very urgent, like a crucial lesson that needed delivering as soon as possible for the salvation of all his pupils

And the best Jesus? Well, they were all brilliant, all made me see things in Jesus which I had never realised before. But of the two that really stay in my memory, one was an atheist. He was deputy head at our local comp when I was Chair of Governors and he was a fixer, whatever I asked him to do, he would sort and sort well. So I asked him to be Christ. The Chair of Governors has power which bishops only dream of, and you don't turn him down.

But he was a simply wonderful Christ, softly spoken every word was heartfelt. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

Archbishop Michael Ramsey always believed that he would meet atheists in heaven. I'm sure I will meet that deputy. I've always felt that an atheist was someone whom God hadn't discovered yet. Or maybe God's closer to them than we believers realise, we who keep God at a safe impassionate distance. Certainly he delivered Jesus straight, freed up from all the trappings and clutter which can make us religious folk so easily miss Him.

The other Jesus is my first one. 'Let's act out the Gospel,' I said to my wife, Rachel, at 8.30 am on Palm Sunday 1984. 'You can be the narrator, I'll be the other voices and we'll get David to be Jesus.' The service were we were going to do all this was at 9 am! Unfortunately David didn't answer his phone, so I drove over to his house, only a mile or so away, the curtains still drawn as I rapped on the door. Eventually David opened his bedroom window and stuck his bedraggled head out. 'What do you want?' he sleepily said. 'David, I want you to be Jesus at the 9 am communion.' I shouted. Goodness knows what his neighbours thought.

'OK,' he replied 'I'll just get washed and dressed and try to join you in time.' I drove off, robed, began the communion on the look-out for David's somewhat crucial arrival. We began the Gospel and on cue David walked in. We hadn't rehearsed, we only had the small print of the Alternative Service Book in front of us, our parts unmarked. It would have been so easy to make a slip, read the wrong part, make the passion into a farce. Yet we didn't. It all went just fine, beautifully, as if God was carrying our one-take. Maybe Jesus doesn't brook too much rehearsal, better when he comes upon us all of a sudden, with his 'Leave all that and follow me!'

Holy week and its story contains an invitation. Not to see this as a story that happened two thousand years ago in a distant land, but to stage it now in this place in our own world, so fearful, our own context, our own families. Even to dare to be Jesus ourselves, to bring all that we are to the part of Jesus and

to bring all that Jesus was and is to colour our part in life, and let it be none other than life-changing; death changing.

Back to Middlesbrough, David's voice was just right, not churchy, rather real, tender, drawing you in to the Passion the love that went unto death. I soon left Middlesbrough, David stayed. grew into a huge man, as massive as Henry VIII at his end, his body ballooned so he could hardly stand, Four years back he fell over during Mass and the fire brigade had to come out to hoist him up again, taking the hallowed Eucharistic liturgy in a novel if surprising direction!

Sadly, not long after that, he died. I like to imagine another surprise knock on his door early one morning. Not me this time, but the Christ he played so beautifully 36 years ago come to call him home. My first Jesus and the very best.

Thou camest, O Lord, with the living word that should set thy people free, but with mocking scorn and with crown of thorn **we** bore thee to Calvary. *O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, There is room in it all for thee.*

When the heavens shall ring, and the angels sing at thy coming to victory, let thy voice call me home, saying, 'Yet there is room, there is room in my life for thee.' *O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, There is room in it all for thee.*