

At Easter 1959, Mervyn Stockwood,
the flamboyant bishop of Southwark
joined a British Council delegation to Moscow.
Despite the death of Stalin,
in Russia it was still a crime to profess Christianity
or express any dissent whatsoever,
punishable by hard labour in the Siberian Gulag.
Not surprisingly,
Mervyn went incognito, suit, shirt and tie.

They stayed at the National Hotel,
with a barbers in the basement harking back
to the days of Imperial splendour.

On Easter Day Mervyn rose early while it was yet dark
and descended to the basement for a shave.

The barbers was staffed entirely by women,
strapping lasses who clearly were
going to head up the shot-putting team
at the forthcoming Olympics in Rome
and clean up all the medals.

Mervyn sat in a vacant chair and a woman
roughly wrapped a towel around him and lathered his face.
Mervyn coughed and his barber noticed his purple ring.
‘You a bishop?’ she barked, wielding her cut-throat razor.
‘Er, I am,’ Mervyn stuttered, fearing immanent martyrdom.

‘аллилуйя Христос воскрес - she cried,
‘Alleuia, Christ is Risen!’

All the other barbers stopped,
raising their razors in the air,

‘Он воистину воскрес аллилуйя

‘He is risen indeed, Alleluia!’ they replied as one.

I have spent over forty years working for the Church,
privileged to encounter a host of godly people along the way.
The Church often frustrates me with
the engine of a lawnmower and the brakes of a juggernaut.
But what really motivates me is that every day I wake up and
wonder where I will meet the risen Christ today,
wonder into what situation I will bring the risen Christ.
That’s the thing about Easter.
Expecting only death and darkness
you are surprised by life and light in all its fullness.
I pray with all my heart that the risen Christ
will cheer and challenge what remains of your day.