



In an article published in The Mail on Sunday today, Archbishop Justin writes about his recent visit to a refugee camp in Rwanda and the hope of Jesus' resurrection.

Read the article here:

Mahama refugee camp is in a dusty valley in the south-east corner of Rwanda. A year ago, there was only some subsistence agriculture – today there are 50,000 Burundian refugees.

Standing in the centre of the camp, I could see more people approaching. Among them were almost 2,000 unaccompanied children, separated from their parents during horrific attacks on the places where they lived. Each carried the story of a life turned upside down, probably altered for ever. They were the human cost of conflict among political leaders. On paper you would think this was one of the most hopeless places on Earth.

I was there earlier this month on a pastoral visit to meet the leaders of the Anglican Church in Burundi and to speak to politicians. Two days before arriving at the camp, I visited a suburb of the capital, Bujumbura, where there had been heavy fighting.

Surrounded by security, we drove through near-deserted streets. That in itself was extraordinary: more than 40 years of travel in Africa have accustomed me to seeing everything bustling, even in the heart of conflict zones. But too many people had fled.

We arrived at a smallish, makeshift church, packed to the doors. Inside we heard testimony of the suffering of local people – one who'd been shot, another beaten, many threatened. Bodies had been found in ditches. My heart sank. What could I say?

I did what I have learned is the best thing to do when among followers of Jesus Christ, however bad their circumstances, whether in that church or in the refugee camp: I spoke about Jesus Christ.

And because it was Jesus Christ that was being spoken about, not because of any speaking gifts that I have, the church quiet fell, with occasional murmurs of support and applause. At the end we sang again and the place lifted in worship, drums playing, people dancing. This was African Christianity, living out its reality in the face of need.

What these people had, in the midst of extraordinary suffering, was hope. Like countless others I have had the privilege of meeting in areas of conflict, they showed remarkable resilience and humanity despite facing extreme poverty and desperate danger, because they had hope. At the same time I have met many people with enormous wealth who confess their lives are empty. They have everything – except hope.

It seems as if hope is in short supply at the moment. Last week we saw the shocking attacks in Brussels, particularly poignant for taking place in the Holy Week of Christian prayer and reconciliation. Elsewhere we see the desolation of whole countries. At home the challenges are great.

Easter renews hope.

The events of Holy Week culminated in Jesus of Nazareth lying dead in a tomb, having been put to death in public on a cross on Good Friday. To Jesus's followers who witnessed his cruel execution, it looked as if everything he stood for – love, forgiveness, truth, joy, acceptance – had died with him. It seemed darkness and evil had won. They had given up hope.

Last week the attackers in Brussels claimed religious justification. A lie, of course, for we know that when people conscript God to violence the only thing they get is an empty idol, for God is love. The answer to this great challenge is found in Easter, in the empty tomb, not in fear, but in hope, because God raised Jesus from the dead and in doing so confirmed his claim that light overcomes darkness, that the life of God overcomes death, that the goodness of God overcomes evil, that the love of God overcomes hatred.

On the first Easter, Jesus was raised to life. It wasn't that his body was resuscitated, having temporarily stopped working. Rather, as the New Testament scholar Bishop Tom Wright puts it, Jesus went 'through death and out the other side into a new form of physicality'. Christians call this resurrection.

I am perfectly convinced the resurrection is as certain a fact as that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 or Dunkirk in 1940. The accounts of eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus are clear. The impact on their lives is clearer still. And the church grew and developed in the first centuries of its life in a way that is inexplicable if it were not for the fact that at the centre of its faith was the risen, living Jesus Christ, offering hope to all.

Because Jesus is alive there is forgiveness on offer for all of us, the burdens of guilt we carry can be put down, for they have been buried with him. Our futures no longer have to be dominated by our past because here is a fresh start for everyone. Jesus is alive so there is forgiveness, grace, peace and joy for everyone. The horizon is not dominated by the past – but by what God can do. And God can raise the dead.

In so many parishes this Easter, people will come together in larger numbers than normal, and they will sing, they will praise, they will celebrate the reality of the life of Jesus Christ. Hope with a face, hands and a voice. Hope brought to us by one whose body bears all the marks of terrible suffering, but no longer knowing pain. This Jesus offers you and me true, real, solid hope today.

I remember in one parish when I was training for ordination, taking part in a baptism in a stream running through an industrial estate. The vicar and I immersed a man in the cold water and lifted him up, the Christian symbol of burial and rebirth to new life in Jesus Christ. Around us, the small church of people facing all kinds of struggles celebrated that Jesus is risen from the dead and so the man being baptised would also have life with God for ever.

And in parishes in places of comfort and wealth, where nevertheless people have the same struggles as everywhere else, as they come together today in worship there will be joy because of the hope Jesus brings. The bereaved will find the hope lifting that the person they loved may be with God. Those facing crises in their own lives through illness will find again that Jesus draws alongside and says: 'Do not fear.' He is our hope.

A week of sorrow for so many, in Belgium, in Turkey, in Burundi, has within it the promise of healing and hope. Easter is the day when we celebrate that God, having given himself to death for our sakes, overcame death that we might have life.

That life is offered freely and without condition to everyone who accepts the gift. We need only turn from our own failures and preoccupations, stretch out our hands in prayer and say ‘yes’ and receive the gift of hope.

6 min read

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