



Easter 1

THE NEW SHOFAR

*My Lord and my God help us in our unbelief
that through faith we can "move mountains"*

I believe in God, the Father the Almighty...

Today's *London Times* newspaper recounts the experiences of a wheelchair bound woman living high up in an apartment in one of the cities of Ukraine battered by months of endless bombardments. With the lifts broken and unable to be repaired, she, and hundreds of other elderly people, the sick, the disabled and those caring for them, endure what has become nothing short of a hell-on-earth existence. The woman is called Brostovskaya, a former seamstress who was paralysed by encephalomyelitis five years ago. She finds herself trapped on the latest battlefield through no wish of her own. I read the story with a touch of shame in my heart as I thought of the petty ills and life experiences I allow to disturb my own behaviour and thinking. Yes, she is sad, she misses her family and life is more than just tough – but she continues to have hope. I am confident that there are thousands like her across the Ukraine and beyond. Why is she not bitter? Angry? Ready to abandon her faith in God? She does not appear to be. As the journalist was leaving her apartment she said to him...*May your words go to God's ears, for I wish only to live to see my daughters and grandchildren one more time.* All she asks for is prayer.

For me that, and other indications of an enduring trust, faith and hope in God was uplifting. While many outside of the Ukraine wonder how God could allow this suffering to continue, she and other Ukrainians remain steadfast in their faith and find in their God a reason for hope. They do not express sentiments of abandonment.

Brostovskaya lives in a world dominated by *the nerve-jangling thump of shellfire and explosions.* Her sense of peace during all of this should not be amazing to we who share her faith and her beliefs. She believes Christ is Risen. I can reasonably presume she experiences His presence every day and that simply knowing the Son of God made Man is there alongside of her in the midst of this carnage, is a source of great comfort. Whilst she and *most of those I saw in Avdiivka looked drained, resigned to a fate over which they had no control, trapped in the path of a war they never wished for,* they join with Thomas in their own proclamation of a life transforming declaration – *My Lord and my God.*

I could not believe in a God who was governed by human expectations

Why then do we Australians find it so difficult to understand people such as Brostovskaya? We lead comfortable lives in a country experiencing almost unlimited peace and safety and yet so many of us find belief in God impossible to even

contemplate. We ask questions Brostovskaya already believes God has answered. Where we seek to put some kind of blame onto God and the apparent unwillingness of God to intervene, Brostovskaya sees her suffering as being man-made, the result of hubris, evil and pride. If there is blame, it goes to human antagonists. Her woes originate here on earth while her hope pours down from heaven. She does not know the hows and whys of the war and the way all this all fits into her understanding of the Kingdom of God and the new world inaugurated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our Christ, but her not knowing is not an impediment to faith. She sees Christ daily, that is why she has faith in His resurrection from the dead.

Having questions about life is a part of our human frailty. There is just no way in which we can have total understanding, be in absolute control. Things go awry. Events in our lives, or in the lives of our families, or even on the wider world stage force us to confront the question: does God really exist? If there is a God, what is he doing? In the ancient world, things were simpler. They could presume that their god was asleep at the wheel. When he woke up, order will be restored. A useful tradition but not one available to we Christian believers. Our modern question is more basic: does God really exist? If God exists, what on earth is He doing? We live in a world dominated by the need for human, scientific “proof” and yet what more proof do we need apart from the lived experiences of billions of post-Easter Christians in every part of God’s creation?

We are the living proof of the resurrection

This was Thomas’ problem. That week for him must have been hell and he stands there overwhelmed by events. Jesus their rabbi, the one who was offering himself as the Messiah of all, the one who had chosen them to follow Him into a new world that was unfolding all around him, a world dominated by love, mercy, inclusion and redemption. Thomas believed in Him. Had seen the miracles He had performed, heard his powerful preaching and was drawn into this vision of a new world. Now he is struggling to believe that the Jesus he saw die right before his eyes is somehow alive. He is battling to draw himself out of his deep depression and simply cannot bring himself to share in the “delusion” of his fellow believers. The horrors of the cross paralyse his believing.

We know the resurrection of Jesus means that death has been overthrown. That is enough to transform the way we understand who we are in God’s creation and to give us a wisdom beyond human reasoning. It is a spiritually dead world that breaks things down into scientific and non-scientific and that is the world in which we live. Thomas went on to be the apostle of the Kingdom, preaching the Good News in Babylon and in Persia and then travelling to Malabar where he became the Apostle bringing faith to India. In the end he was martyred for that same faith, our faith, the faith of Brostovskaya. He may have lost his way but in the end, Christ drew him back.