

Is Jesus My Life Coach? Easter Sunday 2010

In the film *Looking for Eric* we are introduced to a Mancunian postman of that name, whose life is in disarray. Two marriages have gone down the tubes, and the two teenage boys he has been left responsible for rule the roost at home. Their slacker life styles and criminal connections are an indicator of further trouble on the way.

But Eric has troubles enough of his own. After running away from a meeting with his much-missed first wife, he crashes the car, and has a brief spell in hospital. There a psychiatrist asks him, "When were you last happy."

Happiness for him is bound up with football fan memories of his hero, Eric Cantona, the French soccer player who led Manchester United to glory.

Returning home, and at rock bottom, Eric retires to his bedroom, a kind of shrine to Cantona, where, puffing on a joint, he asks a life sized portrait of his hero if he has ever thought about killing himself. To his stunned, incredulous surprise Eric Cantona appears in the room, and speaking in a thick French accent, hands out some very blokey advice about how to recover his life. So the stage is set for a series of appearances and disappearances in which Eric Cantona turns up at opportune moments to encourage and advise his hapless namesake about how to be a man, and about how to recover his self respect. As that begins to happen other people in Eric's immediate orbit start to come right too.

Although I have no interest in football, I could not help but be moved by this film, which is about the rebirth of a human being. The real life Eric Cantona appeared, as himself in this film, and in a sense the role he takes is as life coach to Eric the postman.

I have called this sermon, "Is Jesus my life coach?" It could be argued that there are parallels here to the resurrection appearances of Jesus, his turning up at rock bottom moments to his most devoted followers, his encouraging and advising of them to a more courageous and adventurous style of living. The element of surprise is a commonality here, as is the appearing and disappearing to them at just the right time to move his followers forward towards a greater sense of faith and hope.

But notice that I keep using the word "them," not just him - maybe Jesus starts with individuals, but then he quickly moves on to groups of his followers. In fact his agenda isn't just the restoration of one human life, but rather the calling back of all who were once his followers.

And Jesus was dead, done to death by judicial execution right before the eyes of his immediate followers, in the most obvious way possible. Whereas, the worst thing that has happened to Eric Cantona, so far as I am aware, is a six month suspension. So the frontier Jesus had to cross to be with his own is the greatest that human beings know about.

What is more the Jesus who appears in the resurrection appearances is apparently a figure in transition between the what was and the what is to be of his state of existence. There is however a different quality of being about him in this transitional state. For instance, sometimes his followers don't recognise him at first.

Of course his followers are in transition too, and it could be argued that the business of Jesus in these appearances is to help and guide them through the transition. The content of what he has to say to them pursues two themes. They are to go out and proclaim his message, and to continue his mission. They are to become a community whose way of life will speak volumes about who inspired it, and what he was on about.

These appearances have been called a ray of sunlight from heaven, but they don't actually reveal anything much about heaven at all. Their agenda is more about the mission imperatives of the newly forming Jesus community.

But as we listen to the gospel resurrection accounts we are very interested to know what they have to say about eternal life, and indeed they do shed light on the subject. However, it is in a sense a developed theme away from this transition time for Jesus and the disciples. We have to look at what Jesus was ultimately driving at, his vision of the completed destiny of humankind. That in a sense could be summed up by the slogan, "Take a body...add a community."

When Jesus presents himself to his startled followers he has a body that is recognisably the same as the physical presence they formerly knew him as. Indeed, as Thomas is about to find out, it even has the scars of crucifixion. As we shall be hearing at the Ascension, Jesus took this body in to the Godhead at the end of his season of resurrection appearances.

When the Christian faith talks about eternal life it does so by saying it believes in the resurrection of the body. After our death our soul must take a body, must become an embodied presence if we are to become fully who we are. For the body, our body, is the medium by which we relate to others, are available to others, connect with others. And it is the medium by which we are aware of ourselves. That sense of the shape of what we are relates also to our sense of who we are.

Of course not all of us are happy with the present state or shape of our bodies – we would prefer something more sleek and beautiful, and perhaps athletic. So it is good to hear that Paul has assured us that we will be raised a spiritual body - that this present physical body is a kind of prototype, a seed, for a more glorious framework of connectional existence. Our destiny is not to become some kind of disembodied spirit. That would be contrary to the very nature and structure of the kind of creatures that God has made us to be. There is something about our embodied status that God delights in, and he wants it to continue in a heightened and transformed mode of being in the life of the world to come.

I have called our risen body a glorious framework of connectional existence. All the images of our risen life with God that are put before us in the Scriptures, and by the generality of saints, mystics and theologians, are those of community. We are to find our joy in one another. Indeed these are images of close connection with many people.

One wit has said that the Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city. Indeed a city is an often-repeated motif for talking about the style and site of the life of the redeemed. So if you don't like other people, and just want to be radically alone, then you may find heaven to be a hell.

And that relates back to the community engendering nature of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Even when he appears to just individuals, which is an exception to the groups he most usually comes into the presence of, they are intended to deepen and widen the mutually belonging nature of the fellowship, which now carries his reputation with it. The church is to be, in Henri de Lubac's wonderful phrase, "the corporate destiny of mankind." De Lubac in his teaching ministry waged war on what he saw as the individualism that had sapped Christian's sense of collective belonging, that he makes clear is the very essence of our life together in the church. When the church is at its best it is a consortium of many different mentalities, outlooks, abilities and personalities. And this unusual unity in diversity, and diversity in unity, he saw as the great gift that the church had to hand on to the rest of humanity. Here was a model of what God intended the rest of the human race to share in. What is more this is the way things will be in the life of the world to come. As he put it: "There the saints dwell in fellowship and rejoice in common; their joy is derived from their community."

If I had to sum up the resurrection appearances of Jesus in one word, surprise is the one I would settle on. And that applies also to what he indicates as the shape of things to come for us in our ultimate Christian hope. What is on offer is surprisingly different to the consumer fantasies of individual self-fulfilment that surround us on

every side. We are to be transformed, embodied, connectional people, who are delighted to be part of the throng of the redeemed.