

I'm standing up in front of you as we celebrate the ritual of the seder meal, marking the start of Passover – a meal which is also being celebrated tonight by millions of Jews around the world, some of them right here in Guildford.

There could hardly be a better metaphor for the journey that I have made in my spiritual life. Some of you will know that I used to be a Roman Catholic, and in the Catholic education I received, Judaism was something to be studied only in as far as it is necessary to an understanding of Christian history and teaching. It certainly wasn't a religion whose practices we were encouraged to imitate. But, at least I suppose, I knew that there was such a thing as the Passover meal. In contrast, the ideas that Muslims a) exist, for example and b) might therefore also be there in heaven, were – to be completely honest – ones I remained in ignorance of for quite some years.

The first New Start course in 2008 was a defining moment for me, as it was to be the final kick I needed to formally withdraw from the Catholic church and join what had become the denomination of choice and habit for my whole adult life, namely the Church of England. New Start is a literal description for what that first course gave me, and I'm sure I'll never forget how I felt after the very first night. To this day I remember the next morning bounding along to work in the sunshine, feeling on top of the world. I can't even remember what we talked about that night – I just know that I felt changed by it.

And so here I am, two years later, a 'proper' Anglican. I've lost a father, gained a daughter, and amazingly, been blessed with a third pregnancy. And here we are at the end of another New Start and at the beginning of Easter.

This has always been my favourite time of year, especially at church. From what seemed as a child like hours spent on Good Friday afternoons in a dark, austere church, stark and stripped of every ornament, with the mix of embarrassment and pride at my Dad's reading of the Passion, which he did every year. The next night I would wallow in the combined senses of reflection and anticipation – not to mention the smell of dripping candlewax – of the Saturday night Easter vigil, ready for the joy and fun of Easter Sunday, with mass in the morning, an egg hunt at home and a wonderful family day, as happy as Christmas.

And Easter will always be intimately connected with the music I sang when I was a bit older than that child in the gloomy church, but a good deal younger than I am now – the Allegri, the Bach Passions, the Gibbons – all that stuff. So in some ways, this is the time of year at which I most deeply miss that Catholic heritage, which is why it's a good thing for me to think back over the last few weeks of this year's New Start and reflect on why am so happy to be a member of this Church of England, and of this congregation at Holy Trinity.

Three successive years of New Start have given me huge nourishment in my Christian life, more than many other things I can think of. Whether it's thinking about

prayer, learning more about the bible, considering what it means to be a Christian in this time and place, it's all made me feel as though I really am making a new start, every time.

As for this year – this has been about facing some of the difficult questions that we are faced with, from colleagues, friends, family, the media, and our own consciences: how do we square our faith and traditional Christian teaching with some of the realities of our modern world, whether to do with technology, social change, globalisation, international politics or whatever it happens to be?

Over the last few weeks we've talked about some of the things that at times can appear to threaten the very survival of the Church of England, and it's frustrating that we sometimes seem to be a church which is tearing itself apart over things that to many people in this group at least just aren't a problem.

Even so, I leave here again this year with increased confidence and optimism in my place in the world as a Christian. I am encouraged by this church's willingness to face the tricky, messy human stuff like sex and death, and its desire for concord and participation rather than insistence on compliance or obedience. I rejoice in our enthusiasm for honouring a Jewish tradition, rather than shutting ourselves off from other faiths and customs. Yes, we have much to deal with, but I really believe, we have even more to celebrate.

A happy Easter to you all.

Gerry McElearney

I'm really looking forward to Easter this year because I'm going to be doing something I've never been able to do before. I'll be celebrating on Saturday night at St Mary's, singing in an Orthodox choir with Guildford's Russian orthodox community. You're all very welcome to join us. We start at 11 o'clock at night, and we should finish at some time in the early hours of the morning – probably just in time for you to pop down to the river for the Easter Vigil at 7. Of course, we'll be standing throughout the service – since someone's taken away all the pews!

I have long dreamed of singing in an orthodox choir. Before we came to Guildford two years ago, I lived for nine years in Russia and Ukraine, and several times I broached the suggestion with Orthodox priests that I knew that perhaps I could have a go at singing in their choir. But each time I was turned down – it was made plain to me that if I wasn't Orthodox, I couldn't sing in an Orthodox choir.

So it's only now, here in Guildford, at St Mary's, that I'm getting the chance to fulfil my dream, and to throw my own little bridge across that great schism

which divided the western from the eastern churches a thousand years ago – in fact just around the time that St Mary’s was being built. And no doubt there are lots of these little bridges and there will be more and more in the years ahead. Because what seems to be out of the question to orthodox Russians in Russia seems only natural to Russians living among other faiths and denominations here in Guildford. And, thanks to globalization, our different cultures and traditions – faiths, denominations, social norms, expectations and values – are now bumping up against each other with much more frequency and more intensity than was ever the case before – causing both pain and gain. For me that’s been a common theme in all the sessions of our Lent discussions – that society is changing fast, and the church and we as its members - need to find and express the Christian response to those changes and the challenges they bring – for inter-faith relations, for gender relations, and for the church itself

Another important lesson I’ve drawn from our discussions is the need for us to address those challenges both in terms of equality and diversity. Equality implies an affirmation of the validity of someone else’s orientation, or belief, or point of view, while diversity is about enjoying and celebrating all the richness of experience that we can find in other traditions, without compromising our own.

It reminds me of the parents evening at the international school our children went to in Kiev. Everybody was invited to bring something of their own culture to share with others – preferably edible - and when you came through the door your senses were knocked over by the fantastic smells of Indonesian curry, Mexican stew, French cheeses. I was supposed to be bringing the British contribution and had left it all to the last moment. All I could find in the store cupboard before leaving for school was a packet of oatcakes and a bottle of malt whisky – so mine was the most popular stall in the hall!

But just as you don’t have to be French to enjoy French cheese, you don’t have to be Orthodox to appreciate the beauty of the Orthodox liturgy, or Muslim to acknowledge the devotion and prayerfulness of Islam, or an evangelical to appreciate the reformed tradition.

One of the key issues in our discussions has been whether the Church of England should make a stand on issues like women bishops and gay clergy at the risk of breaking up the Anglican Communion, or hold back at the risk of losing its relevance in modern Britain. I don’t think I’ve reached an answer to that one. I would just share two things. Firstly, this question looks a bit different in congregations in the Diocese of Europe, where I have spent most of the last twenty years. Where the Anglican church in Vienna or Moscow or Kiev is the only one for hundreds of miles around you have to find that middle of the road Anglicanism which draws people together, and doesn’t push them apart. But secondly – and this is drawing on a point which came up in our very first session – the church doesn’t exist for itself. The question is how does our membership of the church give us the strength to live and to witness in the outside world. A world that has grown smaller and more crowded, and is crying out for understanding between peoples and cultures and faiths. I would

just observe that perhaps that's where Anglicans need to display their knack of respecting and resolving competing traditions that in other countries and cultures have proved incompatible – and that this is something for which St Mary's is now providing a venue.

Linda MacLachlan