

Resurrection – not restoration: Frank’s story

Richard Frazer

Richard Frazer spent twenty years as minister of Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh until the end of 2023. During that time, thanks in part to the inspiration that came from Will Storrar’s cultural analysis in the 1990s, he has been developing new forms of ministry in the Grassmarket Community Project (www.grassmarket.org) and the Greyfriars Charteris Centre (www.charteriscentre.com).



Around the time that Professor Will Storrar organised the conference in Old Aberdeen in 1996 to discuss the radical cultural transformation that had taken place in Scotland over the last century, I had a pastoral encounter that, along with the insights of that conference, has shaped my ministry ever since, and strongly echoes Professor Storrar’s thinking, as well as that of Professor David McCrone.

At the time, I was minister at the Cathedral Church of St Machar in Old Aberdeen. The situation I found myself in reminded me of the early days of the church after the first Easter. After Jesus’s resurrection, stories and rumours circulated, ‘He is risen’. Frequently dismissed, these stories were in fact signs that the calamity of Good Friday heralded a new beginning; but this new beginning was not like the old ways. What was obvious was that those who were a part of the inner circle of Jesus’s pre-Easter community could not initially get their heads round a new way of being his community. In Luke 24:10–11, we read about the first reports of the resurrection: ‘Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.’ (NRSV)

In my pastoral encounters with people who were not a part of the regular church community but sought refuge and sanctuary in this ancient cathedral church, it was becoming increasingly clear that the risen Christ

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was present and at work, but often the manifestations of that presence seemed opaque to those of us at the centre of the church. Like the disciples of Jesus’s inner circle, we had an idea of what his community should look like, and we could be dismissive of things that did not look right and familiar.

Was this not the condition of today’s Scotland? The culture around the church was utterly transformed in a few generations, though in many respects the church remained unchanged, just steadily emptying itself of people. We had experienced what Storrar characterises as ‘cultural devastation’.

The model of church we expected people to conform to did not always make sense to those inhabiting this new world. So many of our efforts at mission were about restoration – rebuilding the institution hollowed out in the space of a couple of generations – when we should be anticipating resurrection. Were my pastoral encounters with people on the edge just ‘idle tales’?

Ministering in the ancient cathedral church, we saw people coming to us every day – from tourists to people seeking sanctuary in a world of uncertainty. There were people visiting a place resonant with so much history and people begging for money or some form of help. The encounter with Frank, together with the themes discussed at the conference, were formative in my thinking and a turning point. I began to believe in resurrection not restoration.

Here is the story of Frank.

Frank was a scary-looking man who would often hang around the cathedral and make people on duty welcoming visitors very nervous. He was a big man with a huge scar across his forehead from surgery he had required a few years before.

Day after day, he would come and just sit and wait. Sometimes he would sit on one of the stone benches at the entrance to the cathedral. These medieval benches had a purpose. Beggars would sit there waiting for the distribution of alms from the clergy during the time when St Machar’s was the seat of the Bishops of Aberdeen.

Frank was never violent, but people were wary of him. When I was around, I would sit with him and we would talk. He was a man tormented by the untimely death of his father. ‘I just want my dad to come back’, he would say to me. My reply was always the same, ‘I am so sorry your dad has died, but it is beyond my power to bring him back.’ I was also



concerned that the volunteers in the cathedral did not feel too intimidated and I tried to reassure them that Frank meant no harm.

Frank would regularly abuse drugs and there were moments when his behaviour could become quite erratic. One day, he came to the cathedral and I received an urgent call: ‘Please come, Frank is here and we have a tour just about to begin’. I rushed over to the cathedral and Frank told me that he had just taken a huge number of pills with the intention of taking his own life; such was the torment he felt about the loss of his father. I took him to the vestry, a tiny room under one of the cathedral’s towers, so that we could have a more private conversation.

After a few minutes of talking, I went outside and found strips and strips of pills that confirmed what he had said. When I returned, I realised that Frank was losing consciousness and that we had to act quickly. I struggled to help Frank out of this tiny medieval room with its narrow door. As we emerged into the cathedral, the tour guide was in full flow talking about William Elphinstone, who, in the late fifteenth century, was Bishop of Aberdeen, Chancellor of Scotland and founded the University of Aberdeen in 1495. The darkly humorous juxtaposition of my situation and that of Elphinstone was not lost on me as I struggled to help a semi-conscious and troubled man to an ambulance.

We managed to get Frank to hospital and, a week later, calm and ‘in his right mind’, he returned to the cathedral. We sat quietly side by side once again and I saw a marked change in his demeanour. ‘Do you not know why I have come?’ he asked me as we sat together in the enfolding sanctuary of this ancient, sacred house. ‘His death is my fault. I have put my mum and dad through so much, the drugs, time in jail, I have screwed it all up. I stressed them out so much. It was my fault he died. I just want God to give me some peace after all that has happened. I can’t go on with this torment. I have made such a mess, and my mum, she’s heartbroken.’

Of course, it was then that I realised that he had come to seek forgiveness. He had felt responsible for his father’s death because of all the ways in which his drug addiction and imprisonments had put so much stress upon his family. All the while, we had met this frightening man with his tormented looks as a threat. We saw him as someone to be contained and probably not to be trusted. We were so risk-averse, so numb and insulated from the possibility that Frank might have come to the church for a genuine reason: not to make a nuisance of himself and disturb the



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quiet equilibrium of the sanctuary, as we might have suspected, but to ask for something that is at the very heart of why the church is there.

He had something to teach us, something of Christ to bring to us, and we had thus far failed to connect with him. It felt that this troubled man was too disreputable for our place and what we sought was to maintain the quiet dignity of an ancient house of prayer. Like so many churches, it was too respectable to be a place of welcome to the broken and the lost. Yet Frank was reminding us why we were there.

Indeed, it turned out that he knew better than we did. He knew that, in the midst of torment, shame, guilt and brokenness, the power of forgiveness could be at work, offering healing and hope. I had not seen it, but he had. In a prayer that he prompted me to offer, the moment became a transforming one for Frank, but also for me. Perhaps for the first time, I began to understand the reality and power of forgiveness.

This episode had so much resonance with the stories of Jesus that I had been reading about and preaching about for years. The truth and power of these stories hit me with a freshness and clarity that I had not previously understood. The work we perform in ministry is not just the cultivation of ideas, opinions and propositions. It is about the visceral reality of dealing with the weight of existence. As a minister, I had studied theology, I was familiar with the message, but that day all the learning became real in an entirely new way.

After we prayed, Frank calmly stood up, thanked me, and left the church. I did not see him again for many weeks. Then, one day, walking along a road nearby, I saw him. He was walking hand-in-hand with his mother, pulling her shopping trolley. Frank never became a member of the church, but his life turned around thanks to the message of hope and renewal that is at the heart of the church’s purpose. He also reminded me that even though the institutional church might be failing, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is at loose and at work. As the Celtic rune goes, ‘Often, often, often, Christ comes to us in the stranger’s guise’.

I remembered something I had read not long before. It was a quote from Bishop Elphinstone, this illustrious figure associated with the cathedral in the late Middle Ages. He had said, ‘Those who live by the altar must also serve it’. It was a humble and insightful comment at a time when the church, often overrun with people who sought office in the church for the power it gave them, was about to be convulsed by the Reformation. As another great theologian with links to Aberdeen,



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Professor Donald MacKinnon, had written, holding office in the church has often been ‘a ground for boasting rather than an opportunity for presence’.¹

Like the first disciples, we might dismiss those manifestations as ‘idle tales’. However, in the months and years beyond the first Easter, an astonishing transformation took place. Whilst prior to Easter, the disciples often appeared clumsy and disputatious, following the resurrection they found much greater purpose and clarity of vision. Before Easter, they were wont to misunderstand Jesus, to squabble amongst themselves, and hold out false expectations. As the reality of Christ’s resurrection became clearer, they found courage, energy, and vision that transformed the world.

As we grapple with the radical cultural transformation taking place around us, there is indeed loss and uncertainty. There is also a profound and understandable desire to restore what has vanished. There is also, however, the prospect of embracing the reality of resurrection. The future church might be almost unrecognisable, but it beckons to us. Christ is Risen!

¹ Donald M. MacKinnon, “The Stripping of the Altars”, in *Kenotic Ecclesiology: Select Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 183.

