

# REVEALING THE RESURRECTION

By JENNIFER WILD

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS NOT ABOUT St Clare: it is about Geoff my father, Clare of Assisi and Jesus of Nazareth, who died 20, 741 and (about) 1,964 years ago respectively. My belief is that there is a fundamental likeness in my relationship with each of them, and that this likeness resides essentially in the ongoing nature of the relationship in each case.

There are some obvious differences: only my siblings could claim to have the capacity, if not the inclination, to cultivate the living memory of our father as I do. More than others, Poor Clares can claim to enjoy some special kind of familiar intimacy with St Clare. Any Christian may claim a special degree of intimacy with Jesus Christ. In other words, there is a progressive widening of the significance to others of my father, St Clare and Jesus.

Still, there are likenesses. The ‘insiders’, in each case, though they really do have special knowledge, are also prone to particular blind-nesses: inconvenient facets of the other’s character can be forgotten or ignored, or indeed never discovered. There are always new discoveries to be made, more or less important. Moreover, there are always ways in which the particular person, though irreplaceable, properly ceases to be an object of intense scrutiny and interest in and for themselves, as though they were ends in themselves. They all sometimes recede from us. Though in some sense I have taken each of these three to myself, so that I experience my life as nourished by their lives, I am not necessarily always focused on them.

I can learn more about them from others who may have a more detached attitude and involvement with them – a colleague of my father’s, an Italian historian, a Buddhist with no axe to grind and with a deep reverence for Jesus.

In any case there is an intricate network of relationships of myself with others who also relate to my father, St Clare, Jesus Christ – to any or all of them. My expectations and indeed experience of each of these three are to some extent controlled and modified by the expectations and experience of others.

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

Am I banging my head blindly against the one enormous difference which as a Christian I must acknowledge: that the relationship with Jesus objectively and ideally contains and controls all other relationships, including those I am considering? Odd though it may seem, my answer is that in important ways it does not. What these relationships have in common is, in its own way, as important as what distinguishes them. If this is so, there is something to be learned that has immediate relevance to how I live in relation to my father, to Clare and to Jesus.

They have all died. 'O, but Jesus came back from the dead, rose again, re-surrected . . .' Well, but from the way he carried on, those few times he was seen alive after his crucifixion, his message seems to have been more like 'went on from the dead' than 'came back'. There was no stopping him. 'He is not here.' He has gone, finished with this bit of life. He has gone from us 'all of a piece'. All that is ours has followed him. (Someone has recently suggested that as human growth is potentially without limit, Jesus in glory continues to grow and develop . . .) 'O, but Clare's exceptional holiness was recognized in her lifetime . . . and there is her (as it were) official standing in the eyes of the faithful.' Her exceptional holiness may distinguish her from my father, but 'in death they are not divided'. And my father? So he is not great, famous, or even well known. But he has passed that particular marker — he has died.

And with these three people who have all died, some kind of personal relationship is conceivable for me. Christianity has tended to stress personal relationship with Jesus, some sort of devotional admiration of St Clare, and a devout eagerness to pray for a departed parent or at least to affirm that (in this case) he is 'safe in God's keeping'. It seems odd that those Christians who most stress the personal relationship with Jesus are often deeply suspicious of any attempt to follow up personal relationship with anyone else who has died. Does the Resurrection affect only Jesus? Or only Jesus until some unknown future date? There is, it seems to me, a progressive connection in each case, between myself and my father, Clare and Jesus, played out in *my* life, in three continuing and intertwined relationships, lived out on almost every imaginable level of human living, and always with the promise of more to come along the way, as long as I accept loss with gain.

At this point, and to save further qualifiers, I must say that I could choose my mother, or another person close to me who has died, and likewise (say) St Catherine of Siena, who has been a long-term beloved companion, to set alongside Jesus, who himself remains irreplaceable so long as I stay within my Christian context. St Clare and my father are, for their different reasons, on my mind at present, near to my thoughts and prayers, so on these three this article focuses.

Something that is significant in each case is *place*. I shared only one home with my father, and my memories of that place are replete with memories of him: his going down the front path on his way to the local railway station and to work; digging over the garden among his neat rotated crops; seen through a window at his work-bench; setting off from the back gate in his whites to play bowls; sitting at the head of the table eating his favourite rhubarb pie (too many healthy milk puddings in his childhood); lying back in his armchair by the fire, with the cat on his chest, both of them relaxed. *Place* has its down side too, however. The soil he dug is now covered by another house – apple trees, greenhouse, compost bins, sheltering wall all gone. His body lies (what is left of it) in a hillside grave further up the valley, a cemetery he probably never visited in his lifetime, marked by a rather awful gravestone, as though my mother's natural good taste died with him.

All this would be for me honoured recollections of a past that is gone, if it were not for the fact that the memories of our home are tangled together with my father's moods, his diffidence, his and my mutually easy affection, his sense of being somehow left out of his family's life (his work took him often away), his difficult passage through his children's adolescence (we all suffered from it), and above all his never expressed sense of somehow not being quite a match for my mother.

All that again might be 'just' memory, were it not for the fact that in the last thirteen years of his life, when he and I were 12,000 miles apart, we learned to communicate as never before, as adult father and daughter, now friends, by the exchange of letters between us. Nothing happened overnight, but he like me (I learned later) was amazed and pleased that something real and growing was possible between us. It is this, rooted no doubt in our shared history, that convinces me that our relationship is still ongoing, that our mutual understanding continues to develop, that we are friends in the light of eternity, as we were always intended to be.

I began this section with a person to whom I am most obviously closely bound by physical descent. My reflections on Clare arise from experience over a good many years as a nun in a community dedicated to following Clare's way in a twentieth-century Anglican setting. That there was development in our way of living the Clare life is obvious enough, given that we were a new community, and spent our 'adolescence' in the wake of Vatican II, with all the fresh look at origins that that implied. My acquaintance with Clare began and ended in a place: that there were two places in fact – in Assisi and Oxfordshire – is, oddly enough, of no particular account. Place was and is important. First

Assisi, visited only once, and then in circumstances where impressions had to fight their way through the tensions of pilgrimage, the imminence of new beginnings, the painfulness of departure from home, family, friends and job – the sheer extraordinariness of the situation. Into all this the warm stone of San Damiano breathed a sort of serenity; the bare rooms and old benches seemed friendly, not severe; the flowers that marked Clare's sleeping place and the plain cross on the wall behind, indicating the place of her dying, were homely beyond anything I had expected. The horrors of her 'incorrupt' body at Santa Chiara melted away before this simple ordinariness. The tiny balcony 'garden' with its spectacular view calmed the spirit. Franciscan Umbria cast good spells, giving points of contact in a new and strange, even alien world.

In green and pleasant Oxfordshire the strangeness returned in some measure, as though Clare receded behind the aristocratic aloofness of her most famous painting, that by Simone Martini. The stylized language of her office did not in itself repel, though the world-forsaking, virgin-nuptial, rosebud-strewn atmosphere aroused suspicions about the nature of the monastic enterprise. The prevailing qualities of the person celebrated were there as steadfastness, courage, loyalty and wisdom, and when one of the older sisters told me, 'I find St Clare in her Office', I could feel that I knew what she meant, and knew, too, if haltingly, the person she found there. Found, too, in the garden. For the Umbrian roof-top garden ledge resolved itself into acres of good English soil, rich in weeds as well as in what we tried to grow there. Like Clare herself, the community was engaged in the struggle to give its own expression to its communal aims and way of life, and as the years passed, our sense of her originality and vision was focused in an office that gave more space to her own words, to those of the Gospels and St Paul whom she often quoted, as well as to her own elements of the vision she shared with St Francis. The loyal affection of her sisters who testified in her Process of Canonization affected us in its own way – or perhaps in our way, as we went on more confidently in the way of life that her example suggested to us.

No doubt in years to come, further revisions will result from new insights – indeed, some have happened already – and future Clares will walk with Clare in their own way. Communal understanding will continue to shift, change and grow. Underlying it will be an affectionate respect and reverence for this particular far-off Italian woman, whom we came, in some measure, to know, by living her way in our own way and generation. Others could write informatively about her, discover for us and themselves new or forgotten aspects of her character and her vision

— we set ourselves to live her way, which means (hardly, to a Protestant, paradoxically) that, as she would have intended, ‘he increased while she decreased’. The large unknowables recede in importance when the main message is clear enough — like other Christian saints she points beyond herself even while she is being transformed into the likeness of the one to whom she points. As in all fruitful relationships, so in ours with her, our spirits were enlarged in reaching out to her vision.

The other day I looked again at the handful of paintings of St Clare in various books about her to see if there were any I could ‘recognize’ at all — that is, perhaps, if there were any in which I could recognize myself-in-relation-to-Clare at all. She was not painted in her lifetime, and I know of no serious present-day attempts (the book-covers are awful); the painting by Tiberus (or Tiberino?) of Assisi conveys even less than the more polished work of Martini (which Daniel-Rops called ‘the most beautiful countenance ever given to St Clare’). The wall-paintings in Santa Chiara in Assisi, both that attributed to Cimabue and the fresco attributed to Puccio Capanna, are much ‘nearer’, perhaps because they tell Clare’s story, in their way. Strangely enough, I warm to Capanna’s funeral procession of St Clare: the reposeful, faintly humorous face of the dead Clare speaks more clearly of her cry to God, ‘I thank you for having created me’, than any other I have seen. In other words, it is more humane and human to my eye than any of the static ‘pictures of a saint’. As tends to happen, Clare was absorbed in life and after her death by her own townsfolk (though they gave her second place to San Rufino, the city’s patron), and she was soon sacralized by the Franciscan Order, and, to a modest extent, by the Church at large. The paintings of her are in a style found fitting for the portrayal of sanctity. One way or another she was (it was bound to happen) swathed in the wrappings that were thought to befit a saint. As with my father, my own relationship with Clare has been a matter of place, of memory, and above all of companionship on a shared journey.

‘Place’ has one kind of importance in my relationship with my father, with whom I shared a home for twenty-three years; it has another sort of significance in my relationship with St Clare: though I did indeed see her ‘place’, the place we shared was the setting of a way of life. What about Jesus? At this point it might seem marvellous if I had visited the Holy Land, walked in those places where he walked, seen those mountains, rocks and seas, made pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem and Nazareth. For good or ill, I have had none of this experience, and my sense of sharing Jesus’ place comes, rather tamely, from photographs of fishing boats on the sea of Galilee, and, certainly idiosyncratically, from

one or two dreams: one where I found myself on the mount of the Sermon, sheep-grass-green like the hills of New Zealand but scattered with primroses like English grass in April. The great thing was that I was at home there, in his place, and he was at home in every place where I had been – a helpful redressing of the balance shaken by some retreat conductors' insistence that I must somehow move aside, clear myself out of the way, to make room for him. He and I, we shared a place, just as we share this space of earth and all that surrounds it.

All the same, even this person, like a parent or a 'saint', has to be let go – they go themselves, in fact – and there remains always an element of the unknown, of their unknowableness. To apply this to the person of Jesus is to express a necessary lesson of spiritual life: if it is living at all, the person of Jesus is not at our beck and call, even the hallowed beck and call of the 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ' to which pew-dwellers are often exhorted. For some godly Christians, such exhortations are counter-productive: their religious instinct may indeed find expression in the classic beliefs of the churches, but their orientation, for whatever reasons, is to God alone, God as God. Such people will not find it difficult to agree that we have to 'let go' of our ideas of intimacy with Jesus if we are to be true to our deepest beliefs. Not a few people who have talked with me at one time or another have shaken their heads firmly at my tentative enquiry about the focus of their spiritual energies: Jesus may be the way (of that they may not doubt), but that he is not the end they are sure, if they look to their own experience without being intimidated.

One could sum this up by talking of a shift from 'Christocentric' to 'theocentric' devotion. Perhaps I flatter myself, but I would prefer to avoid this as a short cut, and to dwell, however briefly, on the continuing relation of humans with those who have gone before them, and with a relation to Jesus as one (some would want me to say 'the one') who has in an extraordinary way 'revealed the resurrection by rising to new life'. If I am told that any continuing relation to my father depends on the priority of the Resurrection of Jesus, I have to answer, 'Ah yes, the ongoing transformed and transformative living of Jesus is confirmation that my experience in relation to my father has some degree of reliability, provided that I do not demand what is not given'. *Noli me tangere* is a command to be listened to in many contexts: divine or divinizable humanity may not be clutched at, possessed, whether one's own, or a parent's, a beloved saint's or that of the person who, in revealing to us the resurrection, revealed humanity and divinity to us in one breath. And yet this is our inheritance, to be entered into humbly and confidently and with a divinely human sense of proportion.

Karl Rahner, more vividly than most, has expressed the sense of silence between ourselves and the faithful dead, a barrier of darkness that cannot be passed in this life, a barrier ultimately impervious to inquisitive probings or a need to be in touch, however passionately felt. I think of this barrier as faith, in its sense as the opposite of sight – and in that sense I cannot interpret it as wholly or even partially negative. A dichotomy has been perceived by theologians between ‘the Jesus of history’ and ‘the Christ of faith’. I claim no theologically informed part in their discussions on this point, but I believe that if those labels are used unthinkingly, Christians may lose a proper sense of ‘the Jesus of faith’, the one who has gone before us, *like all who have finished their earthly life*. Faith in this Jesus is a seedbed of hope and indeed of love, a living darkness which nurtures still unknown splendours for humanity. All our relationships, with those ‘departed’ as well as with those still with us in this life, depend on this faith, and are nourished and supported by it.