

Resurrecting Expedition

As a boy I lived in a remote rural area 15 miles south east of York. I was lucky to attend a marvellous primary school with a most inspiring head teacher. Even though we had only ninety pupils, on one occasion he managed to book a surviving member of the Shackleton expedition to address our morning assembly. I remember a gnarled old man, wearing fingerless woollen mittens, showing glass slides on an ancient projector. We were all goggle-eyed as we saw picture after picture of Antarctic waste, with Shackleton's ship, the Endurance, cocooned in ice. The story was as inspiring as the pictures: a group of men marooned near the South Pole as winter set in, somehow crossing hundreds of miles of snow and seas and mountains to make it home. Ever since then I've wanted to be a polar explorer. There is always one moment in childhood when a door opens and lets the future in.

All that came back to me as we recently celebrated the earliest Easter in our lifetime. We held a Son-Rise/Easter Vigil service on Easter Day on top of the moors, but I hadn't reckoned on arctic conditions. The day before the event folk kept asking me if I was going to cancel, but I decided to plough on and told them that if they could see my cycle tracks, then they could follow in their 4x4s with confidence. I set off to cycle the four and half miles at 4.30 am in a snow storm, with the paschal candle peeping out of my rucksack. Bicycle and rider were soon covered with snow, and I kept wobbling off the narrow road into the verge, simply because the two were indistinguishable! A hare (not an Easter bunny!) must have run up the road just minutes before me, and I took great comfort from following her tracks, all the long way to the top. By the time I reached the summit, the snow had stopped and all was perfectly still. Seven other folk turned up, the eldest in her eightieth year, and we lit the bonfire and paschal candle (which I had drilled out, stuffed with wadding and primed with meths, so it burned like a rocket!). Since we didn't have any water to sprinkle over the congregation when they reaffirmed their baptism vows, I took a ball of snow in my hand and made the sign of the cross on their foreheads in ice. In one sense it all seemed a long way from what we used to get up to in the Minster Crypt all those years back when I was Archbishop's chaplain, and we descended to the ancient bowels of York Minster to welcome Easter and baptise and confirm; but in another sense it was a perfect complement to it.

The sun rose as we finished the service at 6 am and I pedalled off along the ridge, taking in views that under normal circumstances you would never had dared turn out for. The snow got deeper and kept freezing up my brakes, so I skidded from right to left. Eventually I made it to the Stokesley road, which was all but impassable; I put my feet down, treated my bike like skis and sped down the hill, called by the distant chimes of Helmsley church to make it in time for the 8 am Communion. Like Shackleton's expedition, I was miraculously coming home. The whole thing seemed like madness, but in a curious way mirrored the madness of the Resurrection. As I'm sure St Paul said somewhere, 'If Christians can't be mad now and again, then they of all people are most to be pitied!'