

1st December- In the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow or at dawn

Two years ago, one of my hens went broody; that is to say she collected together a pile of eggs laid by her and the other hens and sat on them hoping to hatch them out using her body heat. The eggs were unfertilised so there was no chance of them ever hatching out.

I felt some sadness that she was going to try and hatch these eggs without any hope of success, so I sent off for some fertilised eggs which were sent to me through the post and when they arrived, I popped them under her as well.

Twenty days later two of these eggs hatched out and I had two gorgeous little chicks. But then the next thing was: were they going to turn out to be hens or cockerels? In the end it turned out that I had one of each. And of course, that meant that I soon had a crowing cockerel in a built-up area.

I thought that after a few early morning crows, my neighbours would protest. He was very loud. But it turned out that my neighbours were very positive about it, so Cagney (because that's the name that Liz Horrocks chose for him at the Vicarage garden party) stayed and indeed flourished and is a much admired presence in the Vicarage garden.

I used to think that cockerels crowed at the break of dawn. In fact, my cockerel starts crowing well before dawn. It varies when he crows but three o'clock in the morning is probably the time when he most often begins to crow. In other words, he does not crow when the dawn arrives. He crows before the dawn. He heralds the dawn. He tells the world that the light may not be there yet, but it is definitely coming: light is coming into the world.

And three o'clock is the time when the night watchman in the carol 'Past three o'clock' goes around proclaiming "Born is a baby, gentle as maybe. Son of the eternal, Father supernal". When the rest of the town is asleep, some people are at work. They can see the coming light because they are awake when other people are not.

In my retelling of the story of the cockerel of Barcelos, the cockerel is the one who proclaims the innocence of the condemned man, who crows for justice when everybody else is still asleep, just as I am sometimes awake in the small hours stirring restlessly in my bed when my cockerel heralds the coming light.

The story of the cockerel of Barcelos is a miracle story. The cockerel rises from the dead and the condemned pilgrim is set free. We cannot fail to see an echo of the story of the resurrection. And the risen Christ also was up and about early in the morning. John's account of Easter begins with the words, "Early in the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb ..." (John 20:1)

Jesus told his disciples, "Keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake". (Mark 13: 35-37).

Like cockerels, like nightwatchmen, like Mary Magdalene on the first Easter Day, the disciples of Christ, are awake when the rest of the world sleeps. We proclaim the risen Christ and the hope he brings when the rest of the world seems to be in darkness and locked into despair. Like the cockerel of Barcelos, our cry is a cry for justice and liberty from the sin that oppresses humanity.

Christ is risen. He lives and is coming, maybe soon. Every advent we run through our preparations for his coming again. In all our words and actions, we speak of the hope that the world yearns to know. This year is no different. Actually, maybe this year of all years, we need to crow louder and more insistently than ever. This year, more than ever, our calling is to proclaim hope in the living Jesus come among us and wake our neighbours up!