

During Easter we have read how Jesus revealed to his disciples how they should remember him when they break bread and shared the cup of wine.

For us, partaking fully in the sacraments has proved impossible during the Coronavirus lockdown. One day soon we will be reunited with our priest Ian Maslin and celebrate Holy Communion together. In the meantime, here's a short section from Dr David Nott's autobiography, a passage that we hope you will find as moving as we did.

The setting: Dr Nott is famous for risking his life by taking unpaid leave to go on voluntary trips to war zones. Where civil wars erupt and innocent people are being killed, maimed or wounded Nott will turn up among the aid agencies to help the oppressed. His best-selling book "War Doctor, Surgery on the Front Line" (published by Picador) is a riveting insight into his experiences.

Early in the book Nott admits he is not a practicing Christian. He also admits that at times of great emotional stress in the operating theatre he turns to God for help.

The extract here comes from his time in Aleppo, Syria. President Assad's forces were attacking their own people. The Russian airforce flew sorties overhead and bombed the innocents. Nott was in the medical team trying to save the lives of anybody brought to his hospital. And this is one of his experiences...

"Finally we arrived at our destination, the Mar Elias nursing home for the elderly. Opening this door was like passing into the Garden of Eden, such was the contrast with the mayhem and destruction outside. The priest I had come to see greeted us with a warm smile. Michel Alou Yousef clasped my hands in both of his and beckoned us over to a table laid with china cups and plates. As Anmar (my friend and colleague) translated, he told me his story.

The Mar Elias housed a Catholic chapel within its walls, where Michel had worked for many years. He had moved into the home after his house had been blown up, looking after the elderly residents who had stayed behind either by choice or of necessity. Every day he would go to the market to buy food for the residents and cook it for them.

As we were talking, some of the residents emerged to see what was going on. What struck me was how calm and happy they all seemed. Perhaps they had become oblivious to the noise of gunfire and the occasional thud of a bomb being dropped.

Michel looked tired and drawn, much older than his 53 years. He had been ordained as a priest many years ago and was confident that God would help them in the end. He asked me my religion. A Protestant, I told him, Church of England, in fact. Smiling, he said we were all children of God. He suggested we could pray together, and asked if I would like him to bless me in his little chapel. I said it would be a great honour. With this he went off for about 15 minutes before reappearing in the robes of an ordained Catholic priest.

We opened the doors to the little chapel. Inside was an altar with a couple of candles and a picture of Christ above it. He beckoned me to kneel with him in front of the altar and said a few words. I didn't understand the precise meaning of what he was saying but could hear the compassion in his voice. Before I knew what was happening tears were rolling down my face.

Michel disappeared for a moment, returning with a small cup, which he filled with wine. He placed a wafer on my tongue and offered me the cup. He then placed his hand on my head and prayed. For the second time in my life I felt this contact not as something physical but as a spiritual connection;

it did not feel like a man's hand but something much more powerful and profound, radiating energy. An electric shiver ran through me, filling me with love. The first time I had experienced this had been only a few weeks before, when I was at dinner with my great friend Robert Smith, a consultant gynaecologist. Richard is a man of great faith and has a small consecrated chapel in his house. He prayed for me before I went to Syria. When Richard had placed his hand on my head, it had also been an intensely spiritual moment. The emotion I felt then – and now, in Aleppo – was all-consuming.

It encapsulates everything about Syria's tragedy that this moment of grace should have an unhappy ending. Within days the man who bravely guided us through the old city was killed in an airstrike. Six months later Michel was killed, during a barrel-bomb attack while shopping for food for his flock.

Excerpt from David Nott's book “War Doctor, Surgery on the Front Line”, published by Picador.