

Easter 2 Reflection

The gentle uprising (John 20.19-31)

In Chapter 20 of John's gospel there are four vignettes of resurrection – four brief scenes offered as testimony that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

First, there's Mary Magdalene's pre-dawn discovery of the stone rolled away from the tomb and the race between Peter and the 'other' disciple to verify her report. The scene involves a rather elaborate description of which disciple got there first, the order they entered the tomb, and their progressively deepening perception of the scene and its significance.

The second scene involves Mary, who remains weeping at the tomb after the two men have 'returned to their homes'. Looking inside the tomb, she sees yet more, including angels sitting in the place where Jesus' body had been, and then someone she mistakes for the gardener, who turns out to be the risen Lord addressing her by name.

Today's reading picks up at the third scene, which takes place on the evening of this same day – the 'first day of the week'. Here a larger group of disciples is huddled behind locked doors and suddenly the risen Lord is standing in their midst, proclaiming his peace and breathing the Holy Spirit.

And the fourth scene (in the same room a week later) describes Jesus appearing again, this time with Thomas present – 'doubting' Thomas, who is reassured after physically touching Jesus' hands and side.

Each of these vignettes is saturated with theological significance. There's Mary Magdalene's 'turning' three times before she recognises Jesus in the garden – which suggests that to perceive the risen One involves some kind of conversion of the self. In today's reading, Jesus appears to the gathered community despite the locked doors, an indication that he is no longer constrained by the limits of ordinary human life. This experience in turn empowers the disciples to live beyond the limits previously set by death, fear and sin. The encounter with Thomas emphasises that the risen Jesus is indeed the crucified one (he has the scars to prove it!), that he is no mere disembodied spirit or ghost.

This encounter also provides the occasion for what NT scholar Raymond Brown calls the ‘supreme Christological pronouncement of the Fourth Gospel’. For the first time, in the words attributed to Thomas, Jesus is explicitly identified *as* God – ‘*My Lord and my God!*’. This pronouncement marks the climax of John’s gospel. And so, with amazing economy and vividness, these vignettes convey the density and richness of the resurrection encounter, and its meaning for human life.

The resurrection event and the disciples’ witness to it is the foundation of Christian faith. The resurrection event reshapes, so our tradition claims, the whole foundation for human life, realigns creation – (remember the earthquake in Matthew’s version). The old limit of human life – death – is revealed not to be ultimate. The ancient pattern of human violence and the sacrifice of the one for the many, is shown to have nothing to do with God, and no power to alter God’s way of being towards us. God way of being towards us, as we see in John’s vignettes of the risen Christ, is endlessly peaceable, forgiving and hospitable. The resurrection means that we ourselves can learn to *be* this way. Strengthened by the presence of the risen Christ we can live like Christ. There is no need to source our identities defensively – afraid of being ignored, afraid of death, of shame, of condemnation and the ‘powers of darkness’. Instead we can live in the same energy in which Jesus himself lived and moved and had his being – the energy of love. Jesus suffered the fear and violence that distorts our world, in order to show us that fear and violence are not the last word, in order to loosen their grip on us. As with the disciples in those first encounters with the risen Christ, we are invited to entrust ourselves to this revelation of the true nature of things, to ‘believe’ (as John puts it) – to participate in what Paul rightly calls this ‘new creation’ (e.g. ‘If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven...’ - Jn 20.23)

Even so, what strikes me this year (especially in view of the Pandemic and its effects) is how fragile and vulnerable this proclamation of resurrection is. How does God communicate this truth, this new possibility for human life? How does God begin to make it known? Not with the risen Jesus turning up surrounded by an angelic fanfare to rebuke Caiaphas and Pilate and the crowd who condemned him; not with mega-church rallies at

the Colosseum or in Jerusalem, but on an almost absurdly, laughably small scale.

Its first intimation is the unexplained and mute emptiness of the tomb, and one or two reeling disciples peering in at some discarded grave clothes. There's a woman beyond hope, weeping at the tomb, met by someone she barely recognises. There's a small and fearful group huddled behind closed doors, in whose midst Jesus suddenly appears, then disappears, and then reappears a week later to speak directly to Thomas's condition. You can hardly imagine a sophisticated, modern marketing team handling it this way, it's way too understated and un-triumphalist!!

In the early preaching of the resurrection, Peter acknowledges precisely this small-scale, intimate communication when he tells the Gentile Cornelius that God raised Jesus on the third day *'and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead'* (Acts 10.41).

So what's going on here? What does this manner of communicating the resurrection reveal about the Christian life, the kind of life we're invited into?

Well, for one thing, it seems consistent with the way God acts all along. The centre is made visible at the edges, in virtual obscurity and hiddenness. The people chosen to be a blessing to the world are a small Semitic tribe, criss-crossing the desert in search of home; the Son of God is born under a cloud, to an unlikely couple in an outpost of the Roman Empire; and now, these first intimations of resurrection (of the re-foundation of the very basis of life!) are given to a handful of frightened followers who've thus far proved themselves to be (well let's just say) 'less than reliable' in the task of transforming the world. Talk about a risk! And that's before we get involved!! When God invites our participation in the very project of creation and redemption, it seems set up to be maximally vulnerable – ever at risk of collapsing.

And all this suggests that there is something about who God is and what God is doing that is *unable* to be communicated by means that are too secure, too safe, too certain. That there's a tenderness in divine life, in the

Christian life, a sense of exposure, which is missed by those muscular Easter hymns that speak so insistently of victory, triumph and overcoming. Yes, resurrection does transform death and fear, does realign creation, but not in the sense of a triumphal army moving in with boots and shoots to secure an impregnable position – flattening everything in its path. It's more like the cracking of an egg from inside, or the germination of a seed.

The dawning of a new freedom to be.

Received as gift (never conquered, grasped or controlled)

when we least expect it,

in the midst our emptiness,

our darkness,

our sadness...

Coming as an inexhaustible whisper –

a still, small voice.

The gradual

yet potent realisation

of being called by name

and given a voice,

a life,

a vocation.

Resurrection life – *our* life in the wake of Easter Day – does not guarantee security and impregnability. It is not a free pass from the pain and difficulties of life in this world. Rather, it is the possibility of being met in the midst of our pain, and doubt; calmed in the midst of fear, and confusion; touched in the midst of grief, by the presence which, for all its vulnerability, is also radically transforming. And of becoming bearers of this same fragile, yet insistent, love in the world – witnesses of the God who, in the words of St Paul, '*gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist*' (Rom. 4.17). Amen.