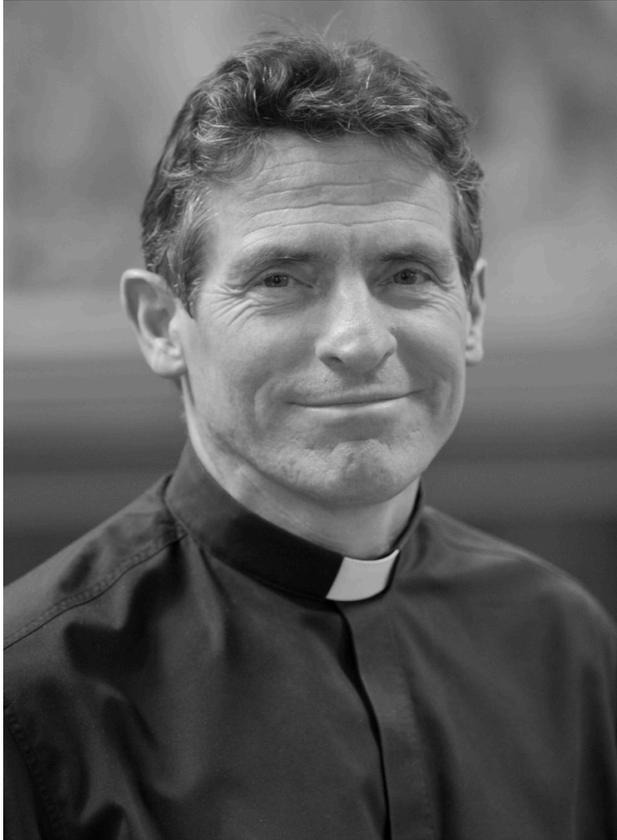


*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH  
CAMBERWELL



**Father David Moore**

*Sermons for the Christian Year*  
— a selection

Father David Moore was Vicar of St John's Anglican Church, Camberwell, from 2013 to 2018. His challenging and engaging sermons during his ministry here remain a significant part of his legacy to the parish. They were published weekly on the parish website, where they can still be found.

This collection of some of his sermons is published to mark the conclusion of his time as Vicar of St John's. The collection comprises a selection of his sermons for the major feasts of the Christian Year, together with sermons preached on selected important saints' days: St John the Evangelist, the parish's patron saint; Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the Apostles; and Mary the God-bearer.

# *maranatha!*

## *Advent Sunday*

27 November 2016

the lections: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:9-14; Matthew 24:36-44

*Maranatha!* Come Lord! This is our *Adventus* prayer. With the turning of a new liturgical year; in the convulsing of a world in birth-pangs, in all its shocking and appalling violence and cruelty and political upheavals; in our own personal and communal disturbances and threats; indeed our hearts cry out with all those who Jesus promised ‘would not die before all these things have taken place’ (Matthew 24:34): *Maranatha!* Come Lord!

For our hearts do long for the coming of the Human One (Matthew 24:39b). That is to say, we do long for the completeness, the one-ness, the peace, the wholeness, the reconciliation, the creative unity-in-diversity which is the gospel’s promise, and for which we were made.

Our hearts are indeed restless – in spite of the smooth outward appearances we have spent lifetimes cultivating – and their restlessness cannot be satisfied with the superficial which we try so hard to substitute for the real. As St Augustine so astutely observed: our heart’s restlessness can only find its rest in the Real, in the Ultimate Truth, in the Ground of All Being, in the coming of the Human One.

However, in the days before ‘the flood’ we are ‘eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage’ (Matthew 24:38) – that is to say, confusing surface for depth – and therefore ‘know nothing until the flood comes and sweeps us away’ (Matthew 24:39:a). And when this happens to us we are truly shocked.

Why are we so surprised by the events of the outer world? And why are we so shocked? Partly because we fail to take account of the inner world. The tragedy of so much religion is that, stuck in concrete literalism, and at the surface, it is both incapable of entering the kingdom itself, and, worse still, prevents others from entering (Matthew 23:13-15). It is truly like Noah’s neighbours who ‘knew nothing’ (Matthew 24:39).

For the kingdom is fundamentally an *inner* reality; which has outer consequences. Swords are beaten into ploughshares *as the fruit of*

*going up to the mountain of the Lord* (Isaiah 2:3-4). When we get this equation the wrong way around, the results are catastrophic; the superficial illegitimately laying claim to what it can never own.

I recently watched the movie ‘The Man Who Saw Infinity’. It’s about the life of an extraordinary uneducated poor peasant from Madras, Ramanujan; who, about 100 years ago, proved to be a mathematical genius. I mention Ramanujan because when questioned by the Cambridge University mathematician elite as to how he came to his astonishing mathematical insights, he claimed that God gave them to him. That is to say, mathematical truths are, first and foremost inner realities, which can be observed exteriorly.

Advent is the liturgical year’s gift to us to re-ground in the inner reality. ‘IT’ people advise us that all computers should be regularly switched off in order to be re-booted, in order to clear out the junk that can hamper the computer’s optimum performance. It’s odd that we so readily take their advice about a mere machine; but do not take equally seriously the need to do so with regard to our inner lives, obviously of infinitely greater value.

But every year on Advent Sunday the Scriptures remind us of the need to re-boot; to wake up to the ways in which, like Noah’s neighbours, we have become preoccupied with outer things, have allowed the superficial to run our lives. “Now is the time to wake from sleep” (Romans 13:11). “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. You also must be ready, for the Human One is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Matthew 24:42,44)

How does this ‘coming’ happen? Generally speaking, shockingly. (Just take a look at the prophetic literature and the gospels!) Because slumber, unconsciousness and superficiality can usually only be dislodged by something shocking. Commentary pouring out of America right now – and indeed from around the Western world – is laden with the language of shock.

But when we keep whatever surface events there might be breaking out in proper perspective – that is to say, when we remember that the evolution of human consciousness is an inner quest – then we can hear again the liberating truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that in this shocking ‘coming’, ‘salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers’ (Romans 13:11b).

“When the Human One does come – that is, when inner reality does break out into consciousness – it brings with it a reorganization of the personality so violent and so complete that it can

only be described in apocalyptic images”.<sup>1</sup> “For at that time there will be great suffering... For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens to lead astray... For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Human One... Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened... the powers of heaven will be shaken.” (Matthew 24:21,24,27,29)

That is precisely what we see happening in the global situation. And we are shocked – and, apparently, taken by great surprise. We can also see it – if we have eyes to see, and are willing to take seriously the spiritual quest – in the convulsions of every level of our life.

Truth-facing generally requires individual, personal self-honesty. That is to say, insight, vision, true wisdom, requires that I begin with myself. To know oneself, said St Augustine, is to know God.

This is the key to Advent. ‘Staying awake’ begins *with me*. The spiritual task is fundamentally a task which each individual must undergo. Collective and communal ‘benefit’ can only come as the fruit of conscious, awake, enlightened individuals. We readily see what happens otherwise: great works of social good can be performed; but those who do them can be so destructive because they are unconscious, asleep, disconnected from their inner reality.

As for Ramanujan and for Jesus, knowledge of the Real comes like a great flash of lightning. The ‘lightning that comes from the east and flashes as far as the west’ (Matthew 24:27) is symbolic of enlightenment, the gift of insight and understanding which does not come from reason or from outside things, but which is the fruit of contact with the inner world. Wakefulness means that when the Human One comes, the Kingdom makes itself felt and known as an unshakeable inner reality.

“Keep awake, therefore”. (Matthew 24:44) This means taking the inner reality seriously; like Noah preparing for the coming flood. *Maranatha!* Come Lord!

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<sup>1</sup> John A Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meanings of Jesus’ Sayings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1970, p206.

# *the question in the crib*

## *the Incarnation of Christ*

25 December 2016

the lections: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews:1:1-4; John 1:1-14

When you gazed at the Christmas Crib, what did you see? What do you think is ‘the message’ of the Crib?

At this time of the year there are many claims as to what constitutes ‘the Christmas message’. The standard ones are easy to rehearse: God is love; God is *self-emptying* love; Jesus brings peace; God has come to rescue us from our sins; Jesus wants us to love each other; Or, in certain circles, God loves babies and the ‘nuclear family’ more than single people and queers.

What is often called ‘the Christmas message’ is typically packaged up as a kind of ‘answer’ to a problem. For instance, because humans are not loving enough, God sends Jesus to make us love more. Or, because we’re always at war with each other – because we’re capable of such violence – God sends baby Jesus as the solution to ‘world peace’. (To believe this, one needs to be completely ignorant of church history, and especially of the church’s own violence!) Or, humans are just so damned despicably and ‘originally sinful’, God sent baby Jesus to grow into the man Jesus, so that he could be punished with brutal execution instead of us! That last ‘answer’ is very popular in some church circles.

It is thus understandable that most of us think that providing an ‘answer’ to a ‘problem’ is the task of Christian faith; since that’s probably what we learned at Sunday School. Typically, *we* are the ‘problem’; God provides the ‘solution’ in baby Jesus. The contents of the Crib, then, is somehow meant to be the ‘answer’. Baby Jesus is a kind of beachhead landing for a rescue-religion mission.

Now I wonder... when you take a step back and reflect, even just for a moment, what do you make of these ‘messages’, these ‘answers’? What do you think of this claim that the birth of baby Jesus is the ‘answer’ to a human problem? Is Christmas an ‘answer’?

“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” (Matthew 11:7). This was the question we heard Jesus pose on the third Advent Sunday. Jesus – at least, the Jesus of the gospels rather than the Jesus

of much religion – is very fond of asking questions. Indeed, his questioning is legendary; on so many occasions he asks pointed questions of people, rather than supplying comforting ready-made answers, forcing people to think for themselves and come to their own answers (e.g. Luke 7:42, 10:36, 15:4, 10:15, Matthew 18:12, 21:16, 21:28, 22:42). “What do you think?” (Matthew 18:12).

And many of his questions would fail the Anglican politeness test; and thus his own people would not accept him (John 1:11). When asked by the religious police to give an account of his authority, he turns the questions on them (Matthew 21:24-25, Matthew 22:18,21, 22:42, 23:34). When he is told that his mother and family are outside wanting to see him, his response is the rude question: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” (Matthew 12:48, Mark 3:33). Even when on trial Jesus’ refusal to answer Pilate’s question is itself a form of question (Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3, John 18:34). In John’s account of this episode ‘the light of the world who shines in the darkness’ (John 1:5) throws back the extraordinary challenge: “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” (John 18:34). When Jesus is gathering a band of followers, this “reflection of God’s glory and exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3) greets would-be disciples with no hail-fellow well-met, welcome-to-the-club pseudo-intimacy. Instead a blunt question to them: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38).

This is because Jesus is a teacher in the wisdom tradition; and wisdom teachers down the ages have always asked would-be followers, ‘What do you want? What are you looking for?’ What is your deepest desire?

Now, I mention all this so that we might gaze into the Christmas Crib with gospel eyes – rather than with the rose-tinted glasses that were possibly put on us at Sunday School, and probably reinforced by the carols which have massaged our December spending. And when we do, we no longer see Christmas as a celebration of a baby. Moreover, with gospel eyes we find not simplistic ‘answers’ – nor marketable ‘solutions’ – but profound questioning.

You see, that’s what the Christmas Crib is, a blunt question to us: ‘What are we looking for?’ ‘What did we come out to see?’ ‘What is our deepest desire?’ Was it just the candles or the flowers or the lovely music, the gorgeous costumes, the handsome building? Was it just to experience the warmth of each other’s company, or of family

Christmases past? Don't get me wrong; these are lovely things, and we are very fortunate to be able to enjoy them – and with recent days' news our gratitude is only deepened. But is this really what we came out to see? Is this really the message of the Christmas Crib?

The human 'face' in the Crib is a blunt question. This is the Word-become-flesh (John 1:14) face who asks us – just as the eternal Word has been asking since the beginning (John 1:1-3) and down the centuries – “And you, who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Who do we say that he is? Who are *we*? Do we truly desire to ‘receive him and become children of God’? (John 1:12-13). ‘What *did* we come out to see?’

For the Crib does not supply ready-made ‘answers’. Answers are designed to shut things down. When religion poses as an answer – as it so often does – it attempts to set ‘the Word made flesh’ in concrete. And in all our hand-wringing about the ‘demise’ of the church, we would do well to consider this as one of the major contributing factors.

Unlike answers, “questions attract and hold our attention. They are irresistible, like a half-open door”.<sup>2</sup> Questions open up space; in mind and in heart. So let Jesus be our guide: “Rather than giving answers and making rules [he] called people to experiential knowledge”.<sup>3</sup>

The Christmas Crib questions us about our experiential knowledge. Indeed, the Incarnation is a series of inter-related questions: What did I come out to see? Who do I say that Jesus is? Who am I? What is the space that the Christ child opens up in the world? And in me? What is the relationship between me and the Christ, and the Creator, and “all the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 52:10), and the entire creation, What am I looking for? What is my deepest desire?

In the Christmas Crib, what is the Creator desiring to *incarnate* – to put into flesh, to embody – in me, in you?

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Freeman, *Jesus: The Teacher Within*, Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2010, p26.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Freeman, p26.

# *the way of the magoi*

## *The Epiphany*

8 January 2017

the lections: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,101-4; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Long before Luke's day of Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2), Christ's birth was already the celebration of outsiders becoming insiders. The Christmas-card fancy-dress appearance at Bethlehem of exotic travellers from 'the east' almost masks the astounding revolution at work. Let us reflect on the nature of this revolution.

Last Sunday Muriel helped us to see more clearly the thread that runs from the ancient Israelite covenant, through the circumcision and naming of Christ; to our own baptism, to the waters of the font. Muriel reminded us that 'covenant' is a binding of relationship between two parties – in the case of ancient Israel, between God and the 'chosen people', an Ancient Near Eastern genetically-linguistically inter-related group. Covenant was maintained through faithfulness to the outer, visible sign of its establishment; namely, in the circumcision of all males.

Covenant as a concept creates insiders, and outsiders. There are the 'chosen' people; then there's the rest, the *goyim*. When this Hebrew word is translated into Greek it becomes εθνῶν *ethnōn*, and in English 'gentiles'. For there to be a covenantal people, there also had to be *goyim*, gentiles, outsiders. This ancient mechanism of the partitioning of humanity can still be observed everywhere.

The revolution in today's feast is this mechanism being blown wide open. The Epiphany celebrates the manifestation – the being made visible – of what the ancient prophet anticipated only for Jews, "I will pour out my spirit on *all* flesh" (Joel 2:28), but now for all people (Acts 2:1).

The apostle Paul will in due course come to reflect theologically on the revolution: "In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed... that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus... to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God." (Ephesians 3:5,6,9)

Paul's claim is that the 'plan of God's mystery' is that the *whole of humankind* is to be understood as heirs, members of the same body. This revolutionary proclamation means that the 'covenant' no longer excludes any person. There are no longer either outsiders or insiders (Galatians 3:28). Persons considered to be outsiders turn out to be insiders.

The Greek word 'magoi' most likely means astrologers, which means these mysterious visitors would have been deeply despised by the purists of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, definitely unclean, impure, outsiders. But Matthew's account of their arduous and dangerous journey makes it clear that the categories 'insider' and 'outsider' have now been turned upside down: the supposed insiders possess information but without wisdom, and are aligned with the wrong power, with Herod (Matthew 2:4-5); while these supposed unclean outsiders practising strange beliefs are found to be kneeling before the powerless Christ child (Matthew 2:11). Of course, this reversal is precisely what we will see unfold again and again throughout Jesus' ministry (Matthew 19:30, 20:16, 23:13, 25:31-46).

Now, from this very brief summary we might have thought that the matter was settled long ago; that as a consequence of the *evangelion* in Christ it would be impossible for the church to construct insiders and outsiders. No more 'chosen' people. The teachings of Jesus could hardly be more decisive, surely? And yet two thousand years of history painfully confronts us. We Christians have constructed ourselves as 'the elect', God's favoured insiders, consigning all others as damnable 'heathen' outsiders.

The tragedy is that we have repeatedly confused the superficiality of membership in a religious club, with the spiritual depth of being members of Christ's body.

Though the mechanism of our exclusion is different. Under the Israelite covenant 'insiders' were defined according to genetics and circumcision; they were simply to cut off the foreskin, remain faithful to the tribe into which they were born, and adhere to the very practical laws. Whereas the Christian covenant created 'insiders' according to the very slippery notion of 'belief'. With us it was 'non-believers' who became outsiders, who we feel duty bound to 'convert', lest they burn in hell for ever.

Having said that, empire and Christendom created conditions that meant those who belonged to the institution were not necessarily primarily there because of belief. It may even be that the

majority of Christians throughout the Christian centuries have not been particularly strong on ‘believing’; but rather more focussed on what nowadays is called ‘belonging’. If you wanted to get on in the world – to do business, and get the right education for your sons, and marry off your daughter to the right family, and so on – you simply had to *belong*. It is even possible that the majority of church-goers were simply enjoying the social and economic benefits of the power of belonging to a respectable club. When it was no longer necessary to belong, they simply moved on. We find this confronting and very painful, of course.

However, the mystery hidden for ages in God, which was not previously made known to humankind, but has now been revealed – that is, the Gentiles having become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus – has nothing to do with either the institutional concept of ‘belonging’, nor the rather rationalistic emphasis on ‘believing’.

Today’s feast’s radical proclamation – that God’s incarnating is for the gentiles – is grounded neither in ‘belonging’, nor ‘believing’. The Magi neither belonged to the ‘chosen people’; nor did they believe in certain propositions. They simply trusted the sign God gave them; were prepared to undergo a dangerous, arduous, and unknown journey into a foreign land, and accepted the suffering of losing their old certainties and having to return via ‘another way’ (Matthew 2:12). That wonderful T S Eliot poem so captures the essence of their suffering:

This birth was hard and bitter agony for us,  
like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old  
dispensation  
with an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.<sup>4</sup>

It is useful, as always, to reflect in the light of the Eucharist. Sharing in Christ’s body and blood does not depend either on belonging to a religious club, nor on believing in supposedly correct ideas. Consider Christ’s table hospitality – and his many parables and

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<sup>4</sup> T S Eliot, ‘The Journey of the Magi’, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London: Faber & Faber, 1963, p110

teachings. All that's required is a willingness to trust the sign that God gives; to undergo the arduous, dangerous, and unknown journey to the Table of transformation; and an acceptance of the call to participate in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 1:29, 3:10; Colossians 1:24), which means we can never go back to some old certainty.

Like the Magi, to 'share in Christ' is neither institutional belonging, nor self-righteous believing. Rather, it is a *spiritual path*, a way into the unknown, a way of en-lighten-ment (Luke 2:32), into an unknown land, for the purpose of transformation.

The *evangelion*, the good news, is that the *whole of humankind* is invited into this spiritual undertaking, all are to 'share in the same body', regardless of any and every distinction we have ever invented.

## *heart revealed, soul pierced* *Candlemas: the Presentation of Christ*

5 February 2017

the lections: Malachi 3:1-4; Ps 84; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

And so it was, at the tender age of 40 days, a number set down in the law (Luke 2:22-24), this fragile and vulnerable infant, whom John the Evangelist calls 'Word made flesh' (John 1:14), was brought by his faithful Jewish parents, to do what was customary under the law.

And, in the midst of making their prescribed offerings, an old man appears, "righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25), one whose 'soul has longed for the courts of the Lord' (Psalm 84:2). And declares over the infant the same essential message delivered by angels to shepherds; that this child is Messiah (Luke 2:11, 26).

And old Simeon is overjoyed, just as the shepherds were overjoyed (Luke 2:20). And all this seems just what we would expect in a story of a divine birth and its promise. And the child's parents were understandably amazed (Luke 2:33).

But, suddenly, the tone of this joyous encounter takes an unexpected and threatening turn. Old Simeon speaks to Mary what must be some of the most devastating words: "This child is destined

for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign to be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). What mother wants to hear this! The child is just 40 days of age! What a shocking prophecy to place on his infant head! What a curse for this young mother!

‘A sign to be opposed’. The child’s purpose, his very *reason* for existence – literally his ‘destiny’ (Gk: *κειται keitai*) – is to bring about opposition, to cause the community of Israel to be divided.

But why such a shocking destiny, why a vocation which sounds so negative to us, and which seems to contradict all our ideas about ‘peace’? For the simple reason that division is the means by which the “thoughts of many hearts will be revealed”.<sup>5</sup> Division is how the inside comes to the outside; how the secret inner thoughts become visible and into the open, how the motivations of the heart are revealed. For the heart harbours, secretly, all manner of hidden motives; making what is hidden in the heart visible is the infant’s destiny, the Messiah’s vocation, the means of salvation.

Clearly this vocation will not be welcomed by those who prefer to not examine their motives, who prefer to work in the shadows of concealed hearts. This, of course, is all of us, the human situation.

The revealing of the thoughts of our hearts is a very painful business, generally speaking an unwelcome exposing of our insides. It is like being broken open; but of course! “Bread is broken so it can be shared, as in the Eucharist. A heart is broken [open] and its suffering is shared.”<sup>6</sup> And this painful revealing is the very means of our salvation; it has been said that “the heart is the point at which a mortal being encounters God”.<sup>7</sup>

We might have thought, at this point, that old Simeon has already said more than enough, that the infant and his parents have perhaps already received what feels more like curse than blessing. But he hasn’t finished with them yet; he has one more piece of destiny to deliver. Speaking still to Mary, he declares, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35).

We feel a kind of speechless disbelief on hearing this devastating promise; an unfathomable sense of undeserved curse. What on earth has Mary done to deserve such a curse! How is it that this courageous

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:35. The word which the NRSV renders as ‘inner’ is in fact καρδων *kardiōn*, hearts.

<sup>6</sup> David Richo, *The Sacred Heart of the World: Restoring Mystical Devotion to Our Spiritual Life*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007, p18.

<sup>7</sup> David Richo, p14

and faithful servant of God, who consents to the angel's message, whose 'Yes!' made possible God's taking human flesh, should be so treated?

A sword will pierce her soul. Pierce? We recall another occasion when Jesus uses the symbol of sword. Matthew's Jesus famously declares: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to divide..." (Matthew 10:34, 35). The sword is a symbol of discrimination. 'Division' is vital to the work of discernment. Jesus' symbol of sword functions in a similar way to Malachi's 'refiner's fire' (Malachi 3:2), the means by which elements can be separated. Of course, the Cross is the Christian tradition's principal symbol of this necessary division.

When these two promises are considered together, it is clear that the exposed heart and pierced soul are closely related. The inner dark places of the heart are to be exposed to the light, made visible. The soul is to be divided, sliced in two. This is the holy vocation of the infant and his mother.

But what about us? The meaning of baptism into Christ, in light of this gospel, is this: Every daughter and son of God is destined for the revealing of the thoughts of hearts. Every time we gather we pray:

O God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts...

Every son and daughter of God is destined to experience the piercing division within themselves, what feels like a slicing through our inner being.

Yes, we undoubtedly feel as inadequate to this destiny as the infant and mother. "Who indeed can endure the day of [the Lord's] coming" (Malachi 3:2). And yet, "because [Christ] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Hebrews 3:18). And this exposing and piercing will be our salvation, and the salvation of the world.

# *what is prayer?*

## *Ash Wednesday*

18 February 2015

the lections: Joel 2:1-2,12-17, Psalm 61:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The liturgy of this day and the season into which we enter invite us ‘to pray’. This seems, therefore, an apt moment to ponder the question: what is prayer? Or, more specifically, what kind of ‘prayer’ might we aim for in the Lenten pilgrimage?

Someone said, ‘show me a person’s prayer, and I’ll tell you what their God is like’. Yes indeed, how we pray *does* reveal a great deal about what we think God is – and how God goes about God’s business. Many of us were taught that praying consists in a whole lot of talking – talking *at* God, about all the things an omniscient deity could be expected to know already! Jesus teaches: “Ask, and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7:7). But Jesus also teaches: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words” (Matthew 6:7).

Our many words are usually a cover for our deep fear of silence – never before so pressing a spiritual problem, perhaps, as in this near-toxically extroverted and noise-bombarded consumer culture. Even doctor’s surgeries are now filled with the soul-destroying noise from wall-mounted LCD TVs! I suspect our terror at the prospect of silence actually reveals the deepest fear of all – actual, raw encounter with the Holy Mystery who is beyond all words, fear, because so unlike the manageable God we have constructed for ourselves.

Many great teachers in our tradition grasped the nettle. “The one who cannot keep silence is not contented with God.” (Fr Herbert Kelly SSM). “Talk of God that does not emerge from silence and lead again into silence does not know with whom it is dealing.” (Hans Kung). “We know that God is intimately with us and we also know that [God] is infinitely beyond us. It is only through deep and liberating silence that we can reconcile the polarities of this mysterious

paradox.”<sup>8</sup> “Silence somehow reaches to the root of our human problem.”<sup>9</sup>

Silence is the midwife of solitude. “Solitude: everything in our culture mitigates against it, from the first prerequisite of the ability to stay in one room, to overcoming the culture's horror vacui, the terror of space or time that is not filled up and overflowing, whether it is our plate at the restaurant, our clothes cupboard, our shelf of spiritual books or, most terrifying of all, interior solitude.”<sup>10</sup>

“When you pray, go into your room, shut the door...” (Matthew 6:6). The evangelists testify to Jesus’ silence: before his family, remaining in Jerusalem as a boy; holding his breath under the muddy Jordan waters, awaiting the voice; in the terror of wilderness; in his penetrating gaze at Peter and others; before the accusers of ‘the woman taken in adultery’; before Pilate; on the cross; in the tomb; in his sudden appearing behind locked doors.

From silence emerges our true relation to God. The real problem with all our words is that they objectify God: “So long as in our prayer we continue to think and feel, to treat God as ‘in relation to ourselves’, it is certain that we have not yet entered into the innermost ‘mansion’ of the Interior Castle... Those whose aim is God never stop short at anything whatever that is thought or felt, no matter how exalted or uplifting it may seem to be. God is beyond.”<sup>11</sup>

In silence before the God who is Beyond, we are as those “having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Silence is analogous not only to solitude, but also to darkness: “It is in the depths of darkness – recognizing that we shall never master or understand what God is like – that enlightenment comes.”<sup>12</sup>

In the context of Lent’s 40 days, then, the prophet’s call for a ‘fast’ is the call to silence before the Holy Mystery – the God who is beyond, who is deep and dazzling darkness – that we may “return to [the Lord] with all our heart” (Joel 2:12-13).

So, returning to the initial question, what is prayer? One of my early spiritual teachers described it this way: ‘Prayer is not so much

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<sup>8</sup> John Main, *Word into Silence*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p7.

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, Oxford: Medio Media, 2003, p45.

<sup>10</sup> Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood, and Spiritual Maturity*, New York: Church Publishing, 2007, p90.

<sup>11</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006, p81.

<sup>12</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, pp73-74.

getting what I want; as becoming who God wants me to be'. Rowan Williams wrote: "Prayer, more and more, is not something *we* do, but what we are *letting* God do in us".<sup>13</sup>

Lenten prayer is a pilgrimage: of becoming who God desires us to be; letting God do God's will in us. Receiving the ashes a sign of our willingness and desire in this regard.

## *undergoing paschal mystery*

### *Passion Sunday of the Palms*

20 March 2016

the lections: Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40, Luke 22:14-23:56

Holy Week offers us the greatest of spiritual resources, everything condensed into a one-week pilgrimage. Yet as with all things religious, these spiritual resources are at great risk of being thwarted, even by we who desire to practice them in good faith. This is the strange paradox of institutional religion. We forget that religion, and all religious rituals and dogmas and texts, are the products of raw encounter with the Divine – not the other way around!

Because of this amnesia, the keeping of religious practices – especially within the context of a religious institution – so readily supplants the necessity for encounter, substituting God for the manageable safety of religious ideas, rituals, Bibles and prayer books, institutional order, and so on. This is what all the great prophets of Israel – echoed again and again by Jesus (Matthew 23:1-36) – warned against.

Holy Week is of no earthly use if it merely confirms the setting in concrete of certain historical propositions, institutional arrangements, approved texts. The point of the Paschal Mystery is not to accept it as an idea to be defended. And certainly not to simply support a religious institution with its many demands.

Rather, the point is to *do it*, to undergo it ourselves. The Pascha is to be experienced. We, too, must go the same way as the Christ. I am not exempt. I dare not merely talk *about* Christ. What use is it to us, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart, if Christ is crucified and rises, if we do not also undergo the same crucifixion and resurrection? Everything

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<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, p78.

we hear and do this week is only of any use, if it supports each of us in the task of undergoing ourselves the Christ way (John 14:12).

Certain crucial aspects of this Christ way are revealed in Holy Week.

Crowds are gripped by that mirage which is the delusory assurance of numbers – as today’s ‘Hosannas’ poignantly illustrate (Mark 11:10; Matthew 23:9; John 12:13). But the Christ resists all such grasping at false assurance.

The crowds, the collective, want him to be their king (John 6:15), the Messiah with the sword, to conquer Rome. But the Christ resists the regressive forces of the collective: in order to be liberated in the truth (John 8:32); to abide in Love (John 14,15).

Crowds imagine that the world can be changed by getting a whole mob of people together. Christ resists this illusion, walking alone to Golgotha.

Crucially, crowds want someone else to do for them what individuals ought to do for themselves. Christ resists this infantile urge, and tells them that they too must take up a cross and do what he does (Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).

Such resistance to the mentality of the collective – including the collective we call Church – is the very essence of the Paschal Mystery. Because the collective, including the church collective, tends to be asleep, unconscious. The collective tends to be regressive, looking backwards with rose-coloured glasses to an imaged golden age, a Garden of Eden.

The Christ reveals that only an individual who is sufficiently conscious is able to resist the regressive unconsciousness of the collective – and thus give birth to something truly new.

Furthermore, this is only possible via the apparent annihilation of what we would now call the false self, a self-focussed ego (Luke 22:42), in a terrifying encounter with the complete absence of meaning and existence (Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46) – which in the imagery of our tradition is the deep darkness which descends on Holy Thursday after the meal (John 13:30), extending through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, that darkness penetrated with Easter dawn’s first light.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the price required to go this way is the highest price there is! That’s the Paschal Mystery: “Those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find their life / soul, *psyche*” (Luke 8:24).

Such is the world of difference between actually undergoing the Paschal Mystery, compared with merely ‘believing in’ certain historical and dogmatic propositions and belonging to an institutional structure called ‘church’. Believing in historical and dogmatic propositions actually costs very little. Whereas doing it, undergoing the Pascha, costs not less than everything.<sup>14</sup> It may cost our reputation, our work, our identity, our friends (Matthew 10:37-39, Luke 14:25-27; Matthew 8:18-22, Luke 9:57-62). It may require us to let go of the one thing we feel we cannot (Matthew 13:44-46). It will certainly require us to face the one deepest and darkest part of ourselves which we have refused to own (Matthew 6:6; Luke 18:9-14), and which we have projected onto others (Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42). It may require us to take a stand against some things – or for some other things – a stand that could have the effect of completely rearranging our life and our relationships. It may even require us to let go of the too-small faith which has sustained us this far, in order to receive the much-larger inheritance God desires for us.

Well, I dare not merely *talk* about these things. Like you, I must *undergo* this also. I, too, must consciously and willingly descend into the grave with Christ, into the Nothing, the Abyss in which in fact all life is generated. From the point of view of ego consciousness, this is without doubt a very real death.

That is the cost of following Christ (Matthew 20:20-28, Luke 10:35-45). This is not child’s play! Not rational belief in historical or dogmatic propositions or institutional life, but *actually dying* that we may rise. The purpose of Holy Week and the sacred Easter Triduum is to initiate us again and again into that momentous undergoing – in whatever particular and unique form it might take for each of us this year.

May Christ be our companion in this great undergoing – that we may have no fear, but live in the truth and liberty, the love, hope and joy of the Paschal Mystery.

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<sup>14</sup> The expression of T S Eliot in ‘Four Quartets’.

# *Sacred Easter Triduum*

13, 14, 16 April 2017

These sermons are like the liturgy of the Easter Triduum, a single liturgy taking three days to pray.

## *the vulnerability of friendship*

### HOLY THURSDAY

The first thing to do as we embark on this Sacred Easter Triduum is to remind ourselves that this is *not* an historical exercise. Perhaps it seems too obvious. Yet I think we do forget that the Paschal Mystery is only partly about Jesus of Nazareth. More importantly, it's about Incarnation, about Word becoming flesh, and the fullness, the completion of all flesh.

And that means it's about us; our flesh, our completion. It is we who are completing Christ's sufferings (Colossians 1:24), as St Paul puts it, we who are to undergo the great Pascha.

This why the words and actions and symbols of this Easter Triduum are about God, yes, but also about us, about human experience. The fullness of being human is now visible and accessible and accomplishable, because there is One who has gone this way ahead of us. As we will hear later in the darkness, "I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14:12).

And the Pascha begins on this holy night around a table; the table of the *Lord*. "An upper room did our *Lord* prepare".

The *Lord*. The world was full of 'lords' exercising authority over others, getting what they want, by force if necessary. So whether we are aware of it or not, when we invoke this word 'Lord', *domination* is its underlying paradigm. Everyone knew that then, and we know it remains so now.

But as we gather around *this* Lord's table the very meaning of 'Lord' is being transformed, transfigured; we could even say transubstantiated! "You call me Lord and Teacher – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [For] unless I wash

you, you have no share with me.”(John 13:13-14,8). In this teaching and demonstration, Jesus makes it clear that *it’s about us*; that we ourselves might become the new humanity, might be transformed, trans-substantiated even!

In this action we see that the world’s domination paradigm is subverted by the One who stoops down very low; towel around the waist, kneeling, handling the lowliest and most despised of body parts (John 13:4,5). Lord-ship after Jesus can no longer mean domination; and all the clever scheming and manipulation, as well as the aggression and violence, that goes with that territory. In an earlier sign, Jesus overthrows the money-changers’ tables in the temple (John 2:15). A little later, as prisoner before Pilate, Jesus declares, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans.” (John 18:36).

Little wonder Jesus so threatened people; for the domination paradigm has always been the currency of empires and nation states and corporations, and institutions everywhere.

But this night we are shown what is the true meaning of Lord-ship; taking the lowest place, kneeling down, washing feet. “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing” (John 15:15) – classic domination paradigm – “but I have called you *friends*”.

This is the new paradigm, the ‘new commandment’ (John 14:34); the paradigm of Lord as companion, as *friend*.

Lord as ‘friend’? As we all know from our own experience, the currency of friendship is self-giving, openness, transparency, humility, self-disclosure; and above all, vulnerability. Friendship is therefore very costly. Unlike the currency of the domination paradigm – which is always scheming, manipulative, transactional, self-interested, and self-protective – friendship is reckless and deeply vulnerable.

Holy Week dramatically reveals Jesus as the kind of Lord who is friend, and thus vulnerable. “One of you will betray me” (John 13:21). ‘Son of God’, yes, ‘Word who was in the beginning with the Father’ (John 1:2), yet vulnerable, open to betrayal. Incredibly, to his betrayer, the false friend, Jesus says, “Friend, do what you are here to do” (Matthew 26:49-50; John 13:27 “Do quickly what you are here to do”).

It is astonishing to us that betrayal lies at the heart of what we call the Christian ευαγγελιον *evangellion*, ‘good news’. Betrayal is the

very means which brings about this paradigm shift from domination to friendship, from grasping to vulnerability. Betrayal, it turns out, is part of the saving means! “The Son of Humankind goes as it is written of him” (Matthew 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22). St Paul will declare that God sent “a messenger of Satan to keep me from being too exalted” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Though in the ‘form of God’, Jesus’ message and meaning is the self-emptying way (Philippians 2:6-7), the Paschal Mystery.

I said the Pascha is about us, about we who gather to undertake this liturgy. Because of this sacred night human history – indeed the unfolding creation itself – can never be the same again. What we see this night is revealed as *our* experience; our common human path of transformation from domination to vulnerable friendship. “Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

This is not a mental exercise – as though we were preparing for an exam – but means nothing less than *undergoing ourselves* what the Great Friend undergoes; becoming ourselves transformed into the pattern of Christ, vulnerable to betrayal and death.

The implications will become clear in the Garden. “Put your sword away”, Jesus tells his followers, “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52; John 18:11).

Of course, it seems impossible to us to live this Christ-like way (Matthew 17:20, 19:26); foolish, or reckless even! Indeed, Christ crucified is “a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Because of which, many will turn back (John 6:66), regressing to the apparent safety of the old domination paradigm.

But this night is ‘gospel’ precisely because we gather at the Table of One who shows us how we are transformed from the domination paradigm. The Host at the Table invites us instead to participate in the Lord who has the words of life (John 6:68).

And this Lord, whose way is the vulnerability of friend, invites us to watch and pray and remain with him (Matthew 26:36,38,40-41); even through the darkest of nights, even if betrayed with a kiss.



# *the freedom of nothing*

## GOOD FRIDAY

On this great and good Friday, we listen again to the Passion of *our Lord*, we touch the Cross of *our Lord*. What does it mean for Jesus to be the crucified ‘*Lord*’, the *Lord* and Saviour?

Last night, at the beginning of this sacred Triduum, we gathered, literally, around the table of the Lord, and reflected on the kind of ‘*Lord*’ who stooped very low; touching the most despised part of the body, washing his disciples’ feet.

In this shocking action – which so appalled Peter – Jesus overturned the domination paradigm. And so we found ourselves in the presence of the Lord-ship of *friend-ship*; intimacy, inter-relatedness, union, above all, vulnerability, who invites us away from “seeking to secure our identity and safety”.<sup>15</sup> And the cost of friendship is exposure to betrayal; even with a kiss!

What kind of Lord *are* we looking for on this Good day? Are we looking for a supernatural ‘lord’ who disrupts the laws of physics in order to suit our desires? Are we looking for the kind of politically-savvy lord so familiar in our world; a pseudo-lord who schemes and plots and manipulates, and when necessary destroys his enemies? Are we looking for a lord who will suffer *instead of us*, who will be our substitute so that we don’t have to take responsibility for ourselves? Or, are we looking for a Lord who will reward us for ‘keeping ourselves nice’?

Such lords are common enough; *within* the church, as outside it. Holy Thursday once-and-for-all exposed and rejected every kind of pseudo-lord.

Moreover, on this Good Friday the price of what that means is shockingly revealed: condemned, handed over, stripped, flogged, crucified, and buried. Now we see the nature of true Lord-ship. It goes without saying that Lord-ship of this kind reveals an image of God we neither expect, nor want!

I’ve been saying that it’s about us. For Lord-ship reveals true humanity; the shape and meaning of every human becoming. When his disciples wanted to be guaranteed places of prominence in the kingdom he not only refused to grant their wish – he invited them into

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, Miami: Convivium, 2012, p74.

his baptism, to drink his cup (Matthew 20:22, Mark 10:37-39, John 18:11).

What makes this day ‘good’, then, is that, defying our expectations, the Lord consciously and willingly becomes what our tradition has called a Nobody, a Nothing (Psalm 22:6), falling into the earth and dying, like the seed (John 12:24). Unless he consented to become the Nothing, he could not become the All.<sup>16</sup>

The mystery is that Christ *is* indeed the Lord of All – but only because his Lord-ship arises from *absolute Nothing*. The living bread is consumed, rendered into nothingness, we might even say ‘annihilated’; and by this annihilation becomes the very means of sustaining life for those to whom he gives himself. “Who eats this bread, will live forever” (John 6:58b); whose self-emptying (Philippians 2:7) is the life-stream of blood and water (John 19:34).

This, then, is what is ‘accomplished’ (John 19:30) on Good Friday: Lord-ship as Nothingness, the Nothingness from which all things miraculously come into being (John 1:3). Christ hangs, willingly, consciously, on this point – waiting, even in total despair (Matthew 27:46) – in a state of non-being. He did not know; just as we do not know where this will go. Or not!

Jesus reveals this non-being as true freedom. “The message of the cross is that pain and death may only be overcome from within, not from above. The faith that emanates from this cross is a faith that enables its disciples to follow the crucified God into the heart of the world’s darkness.”<sup>17</sup>

This Nothingness, in which we see true Lordship, must be experienced, undergone, enfleshed. The Pascha is about us. Veneration at the Cross in this light is silent, bodily consenting to this Nothing-ness ourselves; when we consent to falling into the ground and dying, when we submit to non-being.

Veneration at the Cross will have its outer consequences *when its work is done*; which we call resurrection life, yes. But it is strictly-speaking the mystery hidden since the beginning (Colossians 1:26), an inner reality, a reality of the soul; in which the work itself, not the outcome, is the main event. No one knows the day nor the hour (Matthew 24:36-50; 25:13). The traditional dogmatic symbol of Christ’s descent into hell for three days is a symbolic expression for

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<sup>16</sup> See Marguerite Porete (Ellen L Babinsky, *trans.*), *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, pp192-193.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas John Hall, cited in Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, p56.

this Nothingness-Lordship; the Being who arises from non-being; only at the appointed time.

This is Christ's gift to us. This is true freedom; the freedom of being nothing. And it is Christ's invitation to us; the meaning of our baptism into his death and resurrection, the meaning of our humanity. Christ does not ask us to carry *his* cross – but to take up *our own* (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Only the conscious willing individual can consent to undergoing the evolutionary and salvific work of the experience into Nothingness – abiding with Christ the Nothingness-Lord.

Therefore we touch the cross not to remember history, but as our faltering yet genuine desire to go this way of completion and evolutionary salvation ourselves; and to discover the evangelical mystery, the astonishing freedom, that those who lose their life will find it (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25).



## *the joy of adoration* EASTER DAY

During this Triduum I have been reflecting on that four-letter word 'Lord'; so central to Christian thinking, praying, and acting, and so crucial to unlocking the mystery and the meaning of human being and becoming. And I've been saying that the Pascha is about us; *our* undergoing, *our* human becoming, in the Lord.

And on this most holy morning, as light pierces darkness, we celebrate the passing over from life to death, of our *Lord* Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is *not here* (Matthew 27:6); but Christ is the risen *Lord*. With Mary Magdalene, on this eighth day of creation we are discovering that Lord-ship is no-where; and yet every-where! (John 20:17)

During this sacred Triduum we have been discovering that our usual expectations of what it means to be 'Lord' are so overturned. For our prayer and our acting in the world continue to betray how close we are to Peter – whose refusal to have his feet washed constitutes resistance to Jesus' liberation from the domination

paradigm – and all Jesus’ followers’ deep abhorrence of the Lord’s Nothingness.

Yet we should not be surprised by our deep resistance to Paschal Mystery. From the point of view of our individual ego consciousness, there is something profoundly contrary to nature in the kind of Lord who refuses the domination paradigm; in this *Nothing* Lord. I must add that I am speaking personally.

If we have struggled in the spiritual life, we do know that holding on to life amounts to losing it (Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). We do know that the domination paradigm in fact diminishes the one who apparently has the power (Luke 16:19-31). We do know from the witness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus *the Lord* – and from this queen-of-feast’s dazzling Paschal Light – what is the way to the spiritual evolution for which we long, and towards which the gospel gestures. And of course, we *do* desire to experience the resurrection life enacted by our baptism.

Yet we resist mightily being suspended in nothing-ness. We desire to be the All; yet we mightily resist being the Nothing. Terror and amazement seizes us too (Matthew 14:26), and we become very afraid (Matthew 28:4,5,10). We still want a dominating Lord to swoop in and fix everything up. The Lord remains a ‘fantasy fashioned in our own image’.<sup>18</sup>

In reflecting on the Sacrament, Teilhard de Chardin observed, “I suddenly realized how extraordinary and how disappointing it was. How could Christ be at once so close to my heart and so far from it, so closely united to my body and *so remote from my soul?*”<sup>19</sup> The Lord is so infinitely close; and yet so infinitely remote!

What is this remoteness, this distance, this separation, this inability to *fully* assimilate the Body of Christ, even though we eat at his resurrection table? I think we feel this acutely on Easter Day; which intensifies our sense of the gap. In those striking and hard words to Mary Magdalene: ‘Do not cling’ (John 20:17).

For one thing, Paschal Mystery takes time to evolve in us; we still cannot fully assimilate the Living Word, the Lord of life who emerges only *from the depths of a tomb*, (John 20:9) whose being the Nothing is the *precondition for being the All*.

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin O’Shea CSSR, Reflections on ‘Gethsemane’

<sup>19</sup> Teilhard de Chardin P, ‘Christ in the World of Matter’, in *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Fontana, 1970, p48. Emphasis added.

Reflecting further on this mystery, I have been wondering if perhaps our feeling of separation from the risen Lord – this seemingly-infinite distance – is somehow *necessary*. Yes, necessary. Like everything else in the cosmos, we are ourselves quantum fields and evolutionary process; that which is accomplished in Christ is creation groaning in travail (Romans 8:22), remaining to be brought to completion. “The *full extent and density of the years* which still [remain to us], to be lived and divinized”.<sup>20</sup>

We forget that this, too, is Jesus’ reality, his actual lived human experience. He did *not* know whether all his effort would make any difference.<sup>21</sup>

If this was Jesus’ experience, then it must be ours also. We must die in order to live. We do not know if our life’s work will amount to anything. The outcome can neither be seen; nor guaranteed. That’s the Christian *evangelion*, which we reaffirm this morning at the Font.

Therefore, we celebrate with you, Lyle, in your baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. For we share with you, in faith and hope and love, in the ‘disappointing distance’, the ‘painful separation’, the apparent loss of every fantasy about ‘the Lord’,<sup>22</sup> which, remarkably, turns out to be the “liberating dynamic of dispossession”.<sup>23</sup> True freedom, we discovered on Good Friday, in fact arises from Nothing!

With you, because we are together growing in Christ, we too must go this ‘narrow way that leads to life’ (Matthew 7:13-14). The *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion* is that the loss of all fantasy about God, turns out to be the gate to longing, to our deepest desire, our yearning-towards-completion, our fulfilment in Love.

Finally, we celebrate with you that this is what our tradition calls *adoration*. “God approaches our minds by receding from them”, wrote Thomas Merton, in a profound resurrection affirmation. “We can never fully know [God] if we think of [God] as an object of capture, to be fenced in by the enclosure of our own ideas. [For] we know [God] better after our minds have let [God] go. Every [person] becomes the image of the God [they] adore.”<sup>24</sup> We become what we eat; and we become what we adore!

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<sup>20</sup> Teilhard de Chardin P, p50.

<sup>21</sup> “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

<sup>22</sup> Kevin O’Shea CSSR, Reflections on ‘Gethsemane’

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Bachelard, p74.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, *No man Is An Island*, New York: Harvest Books, 1955, p239.

Thus even our feeling of separation from the risen Lord is itself the work of spiritual evolution, accomplished, ultimately, by the work of adoration, by which we become truly free. The Christian gospel is not believing impossible things; but the discovery of true freedom, through adoration.

The Pascha invites us into the joy of adoration, which is freedom. Adoration is our primary work! By unexpected means of dispossession, betrayal, loss, death, descent into the abyss – by hope, the “conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1), nor guaranteed, culminating in the breaking light of the eighth day of creation, drawn, finally, into adoration on a cosmic scale, in fire and water and oil, in dark and light, in bells and music and incense, in Word and Bread and Wine – every person is a new creation, each of us becoming an image of what we adore!

Christ is risen, yes! And Christ is risen, in us. Alleluia!



# *future calling!*

## *Pentecost Sunday*

15 May 2016

the lections: Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 97, 1 John 1:1-5, John 20:1-8

We are accustomed to thinking that what we do today determines what we deserve tomorrow and when we die – an imagination fuelled by centuries of works righteousness, both Christian and pre-Christian, regularly reaffirmed at funerals, even supposedly Christian ones. But in fact the Christian frame of reference functions in exactly the opposite direction. It's a case of God's future calling forth being in the present, not the other way around.

The spiritual resurrection body to which St Paul refers (1 Corinthians 15:35ff) is the Divine fulfilment which draws us forwards, like the gravitational pull of a star over its satellites, no matter how broken or failed or incomplete the present may appear to us to be. Jesus' death and resurrection – which has been the focus of these fifty days – is what Christian theology calls an eschatological event, because it is the power of God's future to draw out the present, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

During last year's Spring Series I spoke about the Christian doctrine of eschatology, as the fundamental orientation of the liturgy. I invoke eschatology today because Pentecost is so misunderstood, because it is all-too-tempting to associate the giving of the Spirit with spectacle, with dazzling signs and wonders, or with a holy huddle in a religious ghetto, or, more commonly, with that magic fairy sword to rescue us from real life. But as Karl Barth reminded us all, all Christian theology is eschatology.

Thus, the Pentecostal experience only makes sense *eschatologically*, as the power of God's future over the present. The giving of the Spirit to the church is the putting on of a spiritual body, the putting on of imperishability, the swallowing up of death, under the influence of God's fulfilment, the eschaton, in the here and now.

The Advocate, the Spirit of truth who will be with us forever, abides in humankind as present tense, as the gift from the future (John 14:16,17). The giving of the Spirit is the future calling us into death and resurrection: this is the meaning of our baptism.

What, then, will be the signs of this baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit? Will the Pentecostal church be known by its numbers or wealth or by what it says it believes or even by the way in which it prays? Surely, Christ's death and resurrection tells us that we will know the Pentecostal church because it will be the community which is *dying and rising here and now*, putting on imperishability every time it dies to self. When Paul says that what we sow does not come to life unless it dies he is saying nothing more than what Jesus declared. He is certainly not imagining the moment when blood ceases to course through veins. Rather, he is imagining the eschatological fulfilment of God's creative impulse as it is manifesting itself in you and I *in the present moment*. The giving of the Holy Spirit is the gift of the future that enables us to die and rise *now*! Becoming heirs with Christ by the power of the eternal Spirit is not a post-mortem experience! (Romans 8:17) As heirs, in our dying and rising we will do greater works even than Christ! (John 14:12)

We will recognise the Pentecostal church because, following its Teacher, it will be dying to all rivalry and competition, all violence, vengeance and scapegoating, all fear and anxiety. The Pentecostal church will obviously not be fixated on money, numbers, power or influence. The glossolalia of those who tumbled out onto the Jerusalem street were the voices of the eschaton calling them in that present moment to articulate God's future to all the nations gathered in Jerusalem, and ultimately in all the earth. The proof of their being filled with the Spirit was their dying to everything they had imagined God and themselves to be. They were betrayers, after all, not heroes! They were putting on an imperishable body to the extent that they were manifesting Christ's death and resurrection in the present moment.

By baptism into Christ's death and resurrection we, too, are responding to the power of God's future over the present – in spite of how incomplete or unsatisfactory or damaged the present may appear to us to be. The Pentecostal experience is the power of God's eschaton, God's fulfilment, over this present moment. For each of us the spiritual body, an imperishable body, is being drawn forth from us from out of God's future – which requires of us a dying and rising in the present moment. The power of the Holy Spirit is that power which enables us to die in the present moment to something which we would rather not – a self-perception, our precious reputations, a childhood grief, an unforgiveness, possessions, rivalry, vengeance, fear

– and any number of other possibilities, that which must die and rise being unique to each of us, each ‘hearing in our own language’ (Acts 2:11).

And in addition to whatever you and I are being called to die to personally, there will also be a call to a *communal*, collective dying – as parish community, as nation, globally even. What is it that we are in the grip of, which God’s future is calling us to die to, that we may rise?

What is it that must die and rise in you and me, in us, here and now, in order that God’s future may be accomplished in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in this time, at this place?

## *communion of saints*

### *All Saints Day*

30 October 2016

the lections: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Here’s a question for us: thinking about ‘the communion of saints’, what picture do you have in mind? What does it look like? Who’s in it?

The lections set for this feast day graphically testify to the tension that runs through Christian tradition; though admittedly, it is necessary to read beyond the narrow range of verses from both Daniel and the Psalm. Daniel’s violent depiction of the Divine throne room is quite violent, marked by flames and shocking beasts (Daniel 7:3-7). God is ‘righteous’; but God’s dominion is accomplished by violence (Daniel 7:11,14). Psalm 149 starts out harmlessly enough; but quickly turns to shocking two-edged sword vengeance and punishment (Psalm 149:6-9).

So, on the one hand, a shocking and violent dualism: the world carved up into the insiders and outsiders, the saved and the damned, the righteous and the wicked. By this view, the communion of saints demands exclusion.

On the other hand, the letter to the church at Ephesus envisages a communion in which the saints of God will come to the knowledge of the “fullness of [the One] who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23). Christ’s ‘dominion’ seems to be envisaged as a ‘fullness’. I mentioned this ‘fullness’ – the πληρωμα *plērōma* – during the Spring

Series. It's a theological concept intimately associated with the Christian understanding of the eschaton as God's future which is always drawing us forward; into deeper and greater states of wholeness, quite literally completion. 'Completion', understood this way, involves the unification of all things. Because the fundamental state of God's creation is wholeness, *not* dividedness. This is a unitive vision; in striking contrast to the visions of both Daniel and the Psalm, which are fundamentally dualistic.

Herein lies Christianity's painful paradox. What *is* the nature of the 'communion of saints'? Is this 'communion' a perpetually, eternally, divided state of affairs, the 'saints' constituting only a church-approved class of persons? Sadly, this is a picture of God's 'communion of saints' which is instantly recognisable to people in our time. Or is the 'communion of saints' a picture of the 'all in all'; a unified state of affairs, such as was envisaged by the early church teacher Origen in his use of the Greek word *apocatastasis*; a kind of putting back together again that which had become fragmented.

Our problem is that our tradition harbours two visions so at odds with each other. We can search through the Scriptures and find many texts which support these vastly different visions: a vision of ultimate fragmentation; versus a vision of ultimate unification.

Looking at this in very practical terms, we can see that a dualistic vision is much more 'successful' at galvanising the energies that form institutions. In every era of the church, the churches have strengthened their institutional positions by successfully constructing enemies, outsiders, unclean, unrighteous, and so on. Church-sponsored murder of 'heretics', witches, Jews, blacks, gypsies, homosexuals – and God knows how many other forgotten minorities – have this one thing in common, always claiming a Divine 'mandate' in Scripture for ultimate fragmentation. Sadly, this is how we have built our Christian empire.

Looking around us, churches that structure themselves on a dualistic world view are much more 'successful', in terms of attendances and giving and so on. They always trade in certainties; the most important being the 'certainty' that some are 'saved', and some are 'damned'. A fundamental fragmentation of the whole human family lies at the heart of this kind of religion.

But while there may appear to be 'success' in terms of congregational 'growth' at the local, superficial level, in fact the violent dualism upon which this success depends is perhaps the

greatest threat to the future of the church, indeed, in a time when religious respect has become crucial, to the human family in general. It's violent dualism that drives people away from the church. Religion that makes its devotees 'the saved' may be, at the local level, 'successful' but is profoundly destructive at the level of the whole human family. The stakes are now very high – we cannot ignore this. Indeed, it will only become more pressing.

I mentioned last Sunday the topsy-turvy upside down Kingdom, which only the small, inconsequential, child-like can receive. In Jesus' teaching we know as the Beatitudes his thoroughgoing programme of reversal challenges all our 'common sense' expectations: it is the poor who will be blessed; the hungry who will be filled, the weeping who will laugh, the excluded who will be included (Luke 6:20-22). Luke departs from Matthew at this point by immediately introducing the list of 'woes', which Matthew puts off till much later in his gospel, in Jesus final days (Matthew 23:13-32). Just in case the reader doesn't get it: the rich, the full, the laughing, and those with good reputation will all experience woe (Luke 6:24-26).

In light of what I have been saying, the question immediately arises: in this teaching, does Jesus envisage a fragmented, divided human community? Is Jesus' teaching here dualistic; or, is it unitive?

Though it's very difficult to disentangle the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth from the 2000 years of teaching of the church, nevertheless it does strike me that the next few verses make it very clear that Jesus teaches that whoever we might construct as worthy of 'woes' we are to love, and to receive as we would like to be received. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27) is an unmistakably unitive teaching; a vision of a unified, whole, complete human community. Whatever we construct as 'other', 'outsider', 'enemy', 'them' – that is to say, whoever or whatever we construct as the scapegoat – Jesus tells us that these are part of us. So much so are they part of us that we are to love them as ourselves (Luke 6:31,35). Jesus teaches that our dualistic way of thinking is an illusion; and a deadly one at that.

The question that becomes increasingly pressing in our time, then, is this: will the church be able to cast off its 2000 years of dualism and fragmentation – which so infect our doctrines, liturgies, and hymns – and recover the unitive vision of the one we claim to follow? What vision of the 'communion of saints' will we live? This

question is relevant for both the future of the planet, and the future of the church.

*cure of souls*  
*The Reign of Christ*  
20 November 2016

the lections: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

(This sermon was part of the vicar's 2016 annual report.)

*'You having been nominated to the Cure of Souls.'*  
(Archbishop's Licence)

If you've called by my office in the parish centre, you may have noticed on the wall my Licence from the Archbishop. I keep this old-fashioned document there to remind me of the Archbishop's charge to me. When all the archaic Elizabethanesque legalese is pared away, the vicar's task is described in this one phrase: "the Cure of Souls".

Isn't that amazing economy!

This is why I am in fact the 'curate'. And those who are in formation – Kuncoro, and Emily and Richard, and others before them, and others who will follow them – are designated as 'assistant curates' because they assist the 'Cure of Souls'. That's all! And that's enough!

So I am reminding myself that I'm here for the *cure of souls*. That is what I have spent the best part of my adult life committed to. It's what I promised before the Archbishop of Perth at my ordination. It's what I undertook to give my life to at each of my commissionings in the three parishes I have served as 'incumbent'. It's what I have reaffirmed at the Holy Week Chrism Mass before the bishops of Perth, Christchurch, and Melbourne. And that strange old-fashioned document on my office wall reminds me daily – just in case I forget!

So what does it mean to be the 'Cure of Souls'? And why am I talking about myself? Actually, I'm not talking about myself, as I hope becomes clear now.

A Christian theology of ministry holds in dynamic tension two truths: I am an *ordained priest*; and you are the *priesthood of all believers*.

Both statements are true. It's why I keep talking about a community gathered equally around an equal-sided Table; and why that symbol is so important for our mission.

So all of us, therefore, are in the business of the *cure of souls*. It's crucial to distinguish between essential and secondary; between centre and periphery. Being *cure of souls* is our 'core business': everything else is peripheral. Indeed, it's our only *essential* business!

While I have been reflecting on these things, I've remembered my first week as your 'Cure of Souls'. I've included in the printed text of this part of my annual report a copy of the first sermon I preached as your vicar. As a kind of 'vision statement' for the Cure of Souls, you may find it of interest.

Well on this feast day, at liturgical year's end, we present ourselves before the cross of Christ, before the Great Cure of Souls completing his work. We are reminded again that – in spite of our tendency to claim credit for ourselves – we are discovering ourselves as those who are *sought out by Jesus*. Even from the cross, Jesus is still seeking us out in prayer (Luke 23:34).

As he prays for us from the cross, our fears, anxieties, resistances are revealed (Luke 23:35,37,39). And it is precisely through such revealing of the truth about ourselves that our souls are in fact being 'cured' (Luke 23:43)!

And it is gradually dawning on us that the one who reigns is none other than the one who consents to the way down, the path of descent, self-emptying. The one who 'reigns', in St Paul's image, is the one who reconciles "in his fleshly body through death" (Colossians 1:22). The soul is cured – 'saved' if you prefer – by dying to all egoic identity and grasping: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). It is enough!

Of course, in each of us there is a 'deriding' voice: 'Save yourself and us!' (Luke 23:39). We resist the path of descent, preferring superficial and illusory claims to power, pseudo-kingdoms to rescue us from the unwanted feelings of littleness, failure, irrelevance, demise, and of course whatever shame we may be carrying. We can't relax into being disciples called into God's future, because we're anxious and fearful about our reputations, and the future, and the institution (Luke 23:37).

This anxiety fuels our hoping that people will come flocking 'back' to church. The word 'back' reveals a regressive instinct; just as that slogan 'make America great again' has so graphically revealed the

backwards-looking fear gripping that country. This regressive instinct, this going backwards, exposes our captivity to the deadly illusion of a past-tense imagined greatness or security – so that we don't have to feel what it feels like to be the 'little flock'(Luke 12:32), not knowing where the Spirit may lead us.

But Jesus simply invites us to undergo his way. He sees and knows our fears, anxieties and resistances. Undeterred by the locked doors of our hearts, he offers no 'blueprint' other than following in his way. And he says our willingness – our desire (Luke 23:42), our naked intent to go this way – is enough for the cure of souls. It *is* enough!

The simplicity of Jesus' invitation – scandalises all of us, but is alone the way of 'paradise' (Luke 23:43), the way of reconciliation, fullness, and completion (Colossians 1:19, 20, 28). It is *enough!*

Finally, and crucially, we cannot in good faith expect, or invite, others to join us, unless we ourselves are willing to give ourselves over to this way (Luke 11:52), to complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions in our own bodies (Colossians 1:24).

So this is why I am here, with you: for the cure of souls. I'm here to give myself over to this way. And I'm here to accompany *you* on this way.

I don't claim that it's easy; only that it *is* the Christian evangellion. In John Taylor's wonderful image: this is 'the church giving itself to the Spirit'.

And we are here as the priesthood of all believers to *undergo this way together*, as living embodiments of the Paschal Mystery – *in order that we may grow as trusted and wise soul-guides*, so that we may safely accompany those others to whom the Spirit sends us.

And that's enough!

*the gift of john*  
*153<sup>rd</sup> Patronal Feast*  
1 May 2016

the lections: Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 97, 1 John 1:1-5, John 20:1-8

The character of a parish can be profoundly influenced by its patron saint in all kinds of ways. What is distinctive about John's gospel? And what might be John's influence?

Reflecting on these questions, I propose to do two things today. Firstly, I'll offer some reflections about John the Evangelist, and his gospel. Then I'll suggest some ways in which this might be relevant for us, as this parish, at this time.

We do not know with certainty who 'John the Evangelist' was.<sup>25</sup> We cannot even be sure that a person by the name of John wrote the gospel bearing his name; nor even if there was *one* person who wrote it. Indeed, scholars favour multiple authorship; concluding that someone finished it off to the final form we have received. But we can know a great deal about the community for whom John wrote his gospel: their religious background and their spiritual concerns.

Anyone who really listens to John is immediately struck by John's uniqueness, when compared with the other three gospels, the 'synoptics'. In John there is no account of a virginal conception, nor any conception – Jesus is simply called 'the son of Joseph'. Jesus is not baptised by John the Baptist – all John does is 'bear witness' to Jesus. There is no account of temptations, nor transfiguration. The story of the cleansing of the Temple is not associated with the final week of Jesus' life – instead it features at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John introduces characters either unknown or hardly mentioned elsewhere. There are no short provocative sayings, no parables, and no Sermon on the Mount – instead Jesus speaks in long and complex dialogues, with evocative and dense imagery.

Crucially, John shows no interest in 'atonement for sin' – a concern of St Paul, and a neurotic fixation in Christianity. John, rather, is greatly interested in 'life in all its fullness', 'abiding in God's love', and, most importantly, John envisages a radical one-ness with God. Why?

When we consider John's mode – its language, images, and preoccupations – it is unmistakably within what is broadly known as the mystical tradition, specifically, Jewish mysticism. Mysticism appears in every religious tradition: and is often a commentary on the adequacy – or otherwise – of traditional definitions. Written some decades after the synoptic gospels, John appears to have taken what they understood, and then enlarged and profoundly deepened the good news. If we did not have John's gospel, Christianity would be very different indeed.

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<sup>25</sup> See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, New York: Doubleday, 1966, ppLXXXVI ff

It seems that the Johannine community has undergone the excruciating process of separation from the Jewish synagogue. It would appear that they have felt called to take a stand – for an understanding of the meaning of Jesus and the intent of their Jewish religious inheritance – which meant they could no longer remain within the synagogue.

And then it appears that the community has split again, this time internally: between those who, losing their nerve, have attempted to regress, to go backwards to the imagined safety of the synagogue, and those who have become convinced in the future direction of faith in the Christ perceived as Word made flesh. At the end of the long chapter 6 ‘Bread of Life’ discourse the pain within the community is graphic: “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?’ ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” (John 6:60,66).

What is it that’s so difficult in the teaching of John’s Jesus? Without doubt, John’s unique ‘signs’ and symbols are an offence or a stumbling block to the literal-legal minded. “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again” (John 3:3). “Unless I wash you, you have no share in me” (John 13:8). To be grafted into ‘the vine’ (John 15:4-5), to abide with the Father (John 14:17), to “eat the flesh of the Human one” (John 6:53), is the unmistakable challenge of enfleshed mysticism, language to describe the new human consciousness first witnessed in Jesus.

But perhaps the greatest scandal is that, according to John, *all humankind is called* into this new consciousness: “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:23). “I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these” (John 14:12). Greater works! “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:56).

Here is the enormity of John’s proclamation: “This gospel is about the divine appearing in the human and calling the human to a new understanding of what divinity means. It is about bringing God out of the sky and redefining God as the ultimate dimension of the human. It is about the gift of the spirit transcending the limits of the flesh, not in some pious or religious sense, but in opening the flesh to all that it means to be human. It is about seeing Jesus as the doorway

into a new consciousness, which is also a doorway into God, who might be perceived as a universal consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> What a vision! And so, many turned away.

Turning, then, to us, to this particular community of the baptised, at ‘the junction’, at this time – on this our patronal feast day, as we make tangible our renewed commitment to our mission and ministry here – in what ways might John’s insights assist and guide us in our discipleship?

Firstly, we can note the central Johannine calling into one-ness with God: “so that you also may have communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus the Christ... so that your joy may be made full” (1 John 1:3-4). “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10) This tells us that the ‘core business’ of the faith community is union with God: from this sacred centre all else freely flows.

Secondly, we note that this radical union with God involves both a new human consciousness, and a new and redefined understanding of the meaning of Divinity. God, for John, is no longer in the skies – up there, out there, back there – but embedded in wounded human flesh, ‘God as the ultimate dimension of the human’. “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” – a new and universal human consciousness!

Now we can see that these are the spiritual insights of a mature faith community: the kind of community that has grown past the spiritual immaturity of that first flush of unconscious enthusiasm, defined and measured by superficial ‘success’. If we could grasp this, we would no longer fret over our greying hairs, which we would no longer consider as impediment. We would be liberated from the dark spell of all those now-widespread condemning voices.

Instead, we could realise our spiritual maturity as tremendous gift. Look around – you are the gold! Right here, in this building, you are those who have suffered and endured life. And your suffering and wisdom is the very ground in which the Johannine insight can take root and flourish. For only those who have truly suffered are able to grasp the crucial spiritual teaching of Jesus in John’s gospel: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain: but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). The Spirit transcending the limits of the flesh. Mary

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<sup>26</sup> John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p68.

Magdalene grasps this, and this is precisely her gift as the first apostle of the church (John 20:18), in the evolution of human consciousness.

How desperately the world is in need of this spiritual wisdom in our time! If we could accept it, what an astonishing gift we might have to give!

*the work of the soul*  
*mary magdalene: apostle to the apostles*

24 July 2016

the lections: Song of Songs 3:1-4a, Psalm 63, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, John 20:1-18

“Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves... I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me.” (Song of Songs 3:1,4).

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you” (Psalm 63:1).

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation... in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself.” (2 Corinthians 5:16,17,19).

“Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb... [then, after recognising Jesus, she] went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord.’” (John 20:11,18).

In all the Scriptures set for today’s feast we see how our tradition has preserved one of its fundamental insights: how God in Christ has fashioned our hearts for desire, to long for union with the Divine Love, and thus, ultimately, with all things, and that this union is both possible and real.

The ‘organ’ in which this union with Divine Love is accomplished is the soul. It is the soul who loves, and yearns, and searches. It is the soul who accomplishes the reconciling of all things. It is the soul who withstands all suffering and agony, until the breakthrough of recognition. (Psalm 63:5-6).

And this wonderful feast – only recently restored to the mainstream church calendar – reminds us that the quintessential – we could I think almost say ‘archetypal’ – model for us in this spiritual

task is none other than the very same woman who our tradition unjustifiably maligned for so many centuries.

That truth and insight comes from the woman so maligned by Christian tradition is not a surprise, of course – since the very core of our tradition – the Paschal Mystery – witnesses to fact that salvation only comes from the despised, forgiving victim.

So Mary Magdalene embodies tangibly that primary energy intuited in the much-neglected Wisdom tradition: the yearning of the soul for union, for one-ness, by which God is reconciling the world. And it seems most likely that her appalling treatment almost from the beginning of the Christian era is precisely because she ‘gets it’, while the male disciples clearly do not. John’s resurrection account captures this so succinctly: while Mary Magdalene remains at the place of suffering and death, the ‘heroic’ males turn away, uncomprehending, regressing – ‘returning home’ in this case indicates regression.

In early Christian texts – subsequently deemed to be ‘heterodox’ according to the ascendant patriarchy – it is made even more explicit that Jesus regards Mary Magdalene as the pre-eminent disciple: because she has undergone the work of the soul.<sup>27</sup>

Why is it so difficult for the men – and now, regardless of gender, the entire Western consciousness – to undergo the work of the soul? I think it has a great deal to do with the dualism which has so permeated the Western mind. By ‘dualism’ I mean the sundering of our essential one-ness, the destructive division between matter and spirit, consciousness and the material body, earth and heaven, and so on. From Plato to Descartes, through the three Abrahamic faiths, to contemporary materialistic science and economics, dualism – the assertion of an irreconcilable split – has plagued us in every aspect of life. One philosopher has even described this universal deep-rooted dualism as ‘a kind of original sin’.<sup>28</sup>

I am struck that so often in conversation about matters of faith there is an almost total reliance on the propositions people ‘believe in’. There is an almost complete reliance on ‘thinking’ things. The whole Western consciousness has become Cartesian: we think therefore we are!

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<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008, p82.

<sup>28</sup> Stan V McDaniel, ‘Jung, Teilhard, and the Psychological Problem of Dualism’, in Fred R Gustafson (ed), *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Carl Gustav Jung Side by Side*, Cheyenne: Fisher King Books, 2015, p52.

And this one-sided intellect is always plotting and scheming and strategizing and seeking to take control of things. The men at the tomb cannot figure it out in their heads, they can't strategise, they can't control the Easter reality – so they regress to an apparent certainty, uncomprehending.

The Christian community looks for scapegoats for its many difficulties. But I think the real illness is our shocking addiction to strategy, scheming, plotting.

My sense is that this is a significant factor in the paralysis we experience here. We are so accustomed to behaving as though the Body of Christ is an institution, we are trapped in the strategizing and mind games which thwart the flourishing of our true potential, our capacity to seek the One whom our soul loves.

Now I regularly have to point out that as scientist by initial training I am hardly advocating the neglect of mind – or of its creative product, intentional action. But what the clever well-educated Western mind has frequently blinded itself to is its appalling poverty – because in its effort for dominance it has despised, neglected, and even forbidden its opposite. Its opposite perplexes, frustrates intellect – for the very reason that its language, logic and priorities are entirely different, and indeed often countermands intellect.

The crucial neglected factor is the soul – what in the Greek in the New Testament is called *psychē*, which we recognise in English as 'psyche', and which is often translated as 'life'! The hard-line Western mind continues to deny the existence of the psyche; on the grounds that it says it cannot be 'scientifically' measured. There are even schools of 'psychology' that deny the existence of the psyche! The despising of the psyche may indeed be original sin! And quite possibly at the root of many of our modern Western ailments, which we attempt to solve with a materialist-medical model of health – but which the medical model is at a loss to explain.

Mary Magdalene is 'apostle to the apostles' because she knows there is nothing to figure out. She is not in the grip of the dualism that reduces reality to intellect, mind, rationality. Mary experiences the risen Lord because her mind has not taken her soul captive. Mary is seeking the one her soul loves. Because she trusts the mystery of the soul, she remains present to the suffering of both cross and empty tomb. Weeping. Weeping is not a product of mind, but a work of the soul. And the work of her soul – through its weeping – is the crucible

of reconciliation; the vessel in which the new creation in Christ is reborn.

Mary Magdalene has indeed seen the Lord! And this is so much more than mere visual or mental perception. The ‘reward’ for Mary’s soul longing is a tangible knowledge, bodily experience. This experience of the longing soul reconciles all the opposites, heals all dualism, accomplishes the union with God for which we were made.

## *there’s something about mary*

### *Mary, Mother of Our Lord*

16 August 2015

the lections: Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Luke 1:46-55, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:1-7

There’s ‘something about Mary’ – to borrow from the 1998 Hollywood movie title. In spite of puritan extremism – no matter how much neurotic icon-smashers have tried to stamp her out – Mary simply can’t be removed from Christian spirituality.

For the biblical fact of the matter – as the ARCIC statement ‘Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ’ reminds us – is that it’s “impossible to be faithful to Scripture without giving due attention to the person of Mary”.<sup>29</sup> The angel visits Mary with astounding news (Luke 1:26-38). Mary’s ‘Yes!’ – her self-emptying *fiat*<sup>30</sup> – is the “model of holiness, faith and obedience for all Christians”.<sup>31</sup> Mary visits her pregnant cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45) – the Baptist-in-utero’s leaping about prompting Mary’s ecstatic utterance known to us as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), arguably the ‘gold standard’ of Christian social responsibility.<sup>32</sup> Mary presents her 40-day old baby in the Jerusalem temple – accepting old Simeon’s promise of both her son’s spiritual pre-eminence and the necessity of her own suffering soul (Luke 2:22-28). Mary travels with her divine Son, encouraging others to embody her discipleship ‘Yes’: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). Mary

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<sup>29</sup> Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), ‘Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ’, 2 February 2004, para 77. [http://www.ecumenism.net/archive/arcic/mary\\_en.htm](http://www.ecumenism.net/archive/arcic/mary_en.htm)

<sup>30</sup> Luke 1:38 “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be (Latin: *fiat*) with me according to your word”.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ’, para 76.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ’, para 76; “in her song [Mary] proclaims the eschatological reversal which will be at the heart of her son’s proclamation of the Kingdom of God”, para 14.

remains faithful ‘drinking Christ’s cup’ (Mark 10:38; Matthew 20:22) to the last dregs, enduring the self-emptying, the stripping, a mother’s own dying as she stands by her dying son (John 19:25-27).

Indeed, there is no story of Jesus apart from the story of the one whom Christian tradition calls Θεοτοκος *Theotokos*: the God-bearer.<sup>33</sup>

Mary Θεοτοκος is also known in Christian tradition by a multitude of names: Mystical Rose; Morning Star; Queen of Heaven; Ever-virgin; Mother most pure; Eternal Woman; the sacrament of the motherly tenderness of God.<sup>34</sup> She is reckoned to be Revelation’s “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). In her cousin Elizabeth’s ecstatic utterance – prompted by Mary’s visit, and the foetus’ response within her – Elizabeth proclaims one of Mary’s best-known identities: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb [Jesus]” (Luke 1:42). Combine that with the angel’s greeting – “Hail, favoured one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28) – and we have the essence of the ‘Hail Mary’ prayer.<sup>35</sup>

Mary’s prominence in popular spirituality and piety has always increased during times of church-institutional chaos. She is arguably the inevitable necessary compensation for patriarchal church culture. She is certainly a welcome and life-giving leavening in the midst of dry, cerebral, intellectualist, rationalism. As with all periods of oppression and tyranny, the spirit of Mary has at times simply gone ‘underground’ – out of sight of the tyrannisers, quietly, invisibly supporting the spirit of the faithful – waiting for her reappearance at the opportune time. Hence, whenever the church has become dangerously patriarchal and stifflingly rationalistic, Mary has made herself known to the faithful in the form of dreams, visions and apparitions.

There is indeed something about Mary!

In today’s familiar gospel story – against a backdrop of patriarchal power and imperial machination – we read of a deceptively mundane and thoroughly domestic event: “the time came

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<sup>33</sup> Anglicans join all orthodox and catholic Christians in affirming Mary as Θεοτοκος. See ‘Mary, grace and Hope in Christ’ paras 31-34, 76.

<sup>34</sup> Leonardo Boff (trans. Robert R Barr, John W Diercksmeier), *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions*, London: Collins Religious, 1989, p254.

<sup>35</sup> With all orthodox and catholic Christians Anglicans affirm that “Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator, that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church and that the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is not communion-dividing”. ‘Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ’, para 78.

for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in an animal feeding trough.”( Luke 2:6-7) From the vantage point of empire and institutional religion, this is the quiet and invisible work of lady Wisdom, Sophia, the Divine feminine. When the world is stuck – just as it was at the turn of first century Palestine, and just as our world is stuck in so many ways right now – the Divine feminine accomplishes her work out of sight.

Mary Θεοτοκος is the latest and the greatest, for Christians, in a very long line of Divine feminine manifestations: the one “created... at the beginning of [the LORD’s] work, the first of the LORD’s acts long ago... before the beginning of the earth”( Proverbs 8:22-23); “she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of [God’s] goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-27)

Little wonder Mary has held such prominence in Christian history – in light of its thoroughgoing patriarchalism, and its deadly dry and life-less rationalism. The more the church has imposed dogma as moralising rule or propositions to be ‘believed in’, up in the head – the more the faithful have needed renewing in the Divine feminine.

The Spirit has been speaking to the church about this through the voices of a great many feminist theologians, too many to name just now.<sup>36</sup> Because there’s a kind of moving confessional quality about a man admitting to the imbalance of rationality and patriarchy, it’s worth hearing some of the conclusion to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff’s ground-breaking 1979 study, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions*:

The feminine gives us to see another form of being human and civilized. The last several millennia have been lived under the

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<sup>36</sup> For example: D Donnelly (ed) *Mary, Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984; Josephine Griffiths, *The Reclaiming of Wisdom: The Restoration of the Feminine in Christianity*, London: Avon Books, 1984; Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed.), *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993; Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, London: SCM Press, 1995; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

dominance of the masculine... characterized mainly by *logos* – rationality, concept. *Logos* introduces a division between humanity and nature. It turns human beings into rulers of the earth, who subjugate the forces of nature and alter her balance. This mode of civilized being has produced its positive fruits, as well as the dilemmas that so gravely threaten our life in this planet today.

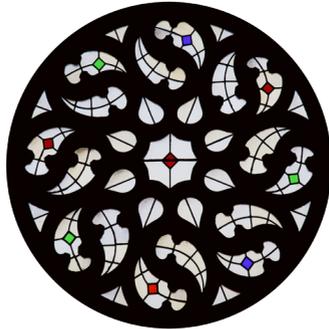
In this context, the feminine emerges as the possibility of an escape between the horns: neither to continue as we have been, nor to regress to the models of a feminine agrarian civilization, but to make room for the feminine dimension in our own culture. Through the feminine we make ourselves capable of another kind of relationship, more communal, more tender, more in solidarity with our roots in cosmos and earth. All great human beings, all profoundly integrated human personalities, have been gentle spirits who have valued the expressions of the anima.<sup>37</sup>

This is an accurate description of the One born when the ‘fullness of time had come’ – “born of a woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4-5), Jesus the Christ. Mary Θεοτοκος emerges in human history as the latest and greatest manifestation of the Divine feminine – but not as an end in herself. Rather, Mary appears silently and invisibly as the means by which human history itself might find the possibility of an ‘escape between the horns’, becoming like the One to whom her faithful and costly life points: the One in whom masculine and feminine principles are profoundly integrated, Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Leonardo Boff, p 254.

Holy One,  
you have revealed to your Church,  
through your servant John,  
the dazzling vision of your light,  
the eternal Word of your truth,  
the deep wisdom of your heart.  
May we who are inspired by John  
also walk in the way of Jesus the Christ;  
here at the Junction,  
wherever you send us,  
in the service of love;  
we pray in the name of Christ.  
Amen.



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