

# *paschal transformation*

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## *transforming betrayal*

Holy Thursday

This is the night of self-sacrificing love which stoops low,<sup>1</sup> of welcoming the darkness of betrayal, of the shattering of the heart, of putting on what T S Eliot called an 'intolerable shirt of flame', being 'consumed by fire',<sup>2</sup> of conscious descent into what Thomas Merton called the 'absolute poverty of being which is God's pure glory', a point of 'pure nothingness at the centre of our being'.<sup>3</sup>

It seems very unlikely that this night's liturgy tends to be undervalued simply because of the demands of a busy life – school holidays, an extra-long weekend, the practical difficulties of getting out at night. As a friend of mine says: Holy Thursday, not Good Friday, is actually the most difficult and demanding liturgy, the night when the boys become men, when the girls become women.

Holy Thursday, in fact, constitutes the great spiritual revolution. The excruciatingly-impossible decision is made on this night – Friday is simply its outworking. Paradoxically, medieval art's depictions and Mel Gibson-esque fixation on the grisly details of crucifixion may well constitute something of a tragic and regressive avoidance of this night's greater demand. I think we all know that the decision is always the hardest thing – it is always the moment of decision which causes us sleepless nights and tears. Once we've agonised our passage through a Gethsemane moment, living with the consequences is in fact easier – almost a relief.

In John's treatment of the betrayal there is a most peculiar element: "When Jesus had dipped the piece of bread [in the dish], he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the bread, Satan entered into him [Judas]." <sup>4</sup> Though Matthew and Mark also make mention of the betrayer as one who 'dips his hand in the dish with me'<sup>5</sup>, John's detail is unique. The eating of the 'morsel' of bread is symbolically identified with Satan entering Judas – as though Satan is in the morsel of bread itself!

What's unique and startling in John is this: betrayal is not only *necessary* and *welcomed* by Jesus; *he actually gives* the morsel with which Satan enters the betrayer; the moment of evil betrayal *specifically pinpointed to this moment of eating* the morsel. Jesus knows that the giving of the morsel of bread *will precipitate betrayal*; *he chooses* to give it to Judas; Satan enters Judas with the morsel which Jesus has given him. After which, it is 'night' – which constitutes glory! <sup>6</sup>

This teaching is profoundly scandalous, an offence – who can accept it! <sup>7</sup>Indeed, it is night!

'Night' is the shattering of a heart: a stripping, a bending down to the floor; handling and caressing of the most despised part of the human body; the torment of an intolerable shirt of flame, a garment of Love, the agonising death of the ego in a moment of its absolute poverty, the point of absolute nothingness which is

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:4-12

<sup>2</sup> T S Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets*, London: Faber & Faber, 1944, p42.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, from 'A Member of the Human Race', cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008, p43.

<sup>4</sup> John 13:27

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:23, Mark 14:20

<sup>6</sup> John 13:30,32

<sup>7</sup> John 6:60

untouched by sin and illusion and which is never at our disposal,<sup>8</sup> a voluntary being consumed by the fire of Love which transforms evil and existential darkness.

We cannot evade the fact that there is no Paschal Mystery without this obliteration – this depth plunge, this fiery garment of Love. There *must* be a betrayal. There *must* be a descent into a little point of nothingness. “Now the Human One has been glorified”.<sup>9</sup> ‘Night’ constitutes ‘glory’! Incredible! Unbelievable! Impossible!

Humanly speaking, impossible indeed! Yet, what is humanly impossible is possible with God.<sup>10</sup> This night not only declares the necessity of betrayal – it proclaims the transformation of betrayal. This, truly, is the blazing and loving heart of the Paschal Mystery – a garment of fiery transfiguring Love!

This is truly an **euaggelion** *evangelion* – a most startling, unexpected, and scandalous ‘good news’. “Do you know what I have done to you?”<sup>11</sup> “You also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done.”<sup>12</sup> “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”<sup>13</sup> “If you do these things you are blessed”.<sup>14</sup> “You will indeed drink my cup”.<sup>15</sup> “The one who believes in me will do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these”.<sup>16</sup> “We only live... consumed by either fire or fire”.<sup>17</sup>

Two thousand years on, we can as yet hardly grasp all this.

Even so, all of us know the reality of betrayal – the instruments and details of betrayal being as varied as are we. The key to the spiritual evolution in Christ may well be response to betrayal. For all have known betrayal – and all of us know only too well our instinctual response, a response which simply begets a deeper and destructive darkness.

Holy Thursday is the ‘answer’ to betrayal and its resultant annihilating darkness. Though we cannot adequately account for the fact of the betrayal we are bound to experience – nevertheless the Christian key to its transformation is self-emptying love, the plunge into nothingness, the fiery garment of transformation. In the love ‘command’ of Jesus we are invited to receive, to welcome ‘the kiss’ of betrayal,<sup>18</sup> to recognise and welcome that which is the very means by which the Paschal Mystery is being accomplished – even when everything in us cries out against its enormity and injustice. How can betrayal possibly be welcomed? Surely not!

Little wonder my friend says this night is the key to the Paschal Mystery, before which we are surely stripped, darkened, and silenced – just as this liturgy will soon tangibly embody. Not merely a pious gesture – this stripping and darkening is real; an outward and visible sign of an inner and invisible reality with which every person is acquainted.

Stripped, darkened, silenced – the Christian evangel incredibly declares that putting on the intolerable shirt of flame is the moment of glory, the moment of the overcoming of betrayal and evil, the moment of drinking the cup, the moment of the triumph of self-emptying Love. During the darkening and stripping tonight we will hear the voice of Jesus echoing, beckoning, down the centuries: “Rise, let us be on our way”.<sup>19</sup>

## *transforming the will-to-power* Good Friday

As anyone can observe, it is perfectly possible to ‘believe in’ the Church’s official doctrines about the divinity and resurrection of Christ, and so on – perfectly possible to repeat all the right-sounding pious mantras, to correctly parrot the various biblical ‘proof texts’, to perform the correct liturgical actions – yet

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *op cit*.

<sup>9</sup> John 13:31

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:37, Mark 10:27 & parallels

<sup>11</sup> John 13:12

<sup>12</sup> John 13:14-15

<sup>13</sup> John 13:34

<sup>14</sup> John 13:17

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 20:23

<sup>16</sup> John 14:12

<sup>17</sup> T S Eliot, *op cit*

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 26:50

<sup>19</sup> John 14:31

remain entirely embedded in the world's conventional power dynamics. Indeed, all too often our true allegiance betrays us: it is often true that 'we have no king but Caesar!' <sup>20</sup>

The issue is power. What Alfred Adler called the 'will to power' is spectacularly successful in the short term – as any materialist, political economist, industrialist, or any form of 'self-made man' (or woman!) can easily demonstrate – but notoriously destructive, even lethal, in the long run. This can be readily examined everywhere: in households, empires, monarchies, inquisitions, nation states, corporations, and, tragically, in churches. Have we bothered, for instance, to critically think through what will be the long-term consequences of the tough-talking, strong-man, supposedly-successful closing of the nation's borders to the desperate and despairing? More painfully for the churches on this day, have we Christians really faced up to the truth of our dark history of councils, excommunications, and crusades?

Just as some of us Christians are still hankering after a great reawakening of a once-more powerful church – so, many in Israel longed for a great reawakening of the national will to power. There were more than enough scriptural texts to fuel what must surely be an ancient, deep-seated human characteristic. Onto Jesus the Christ being projected this heroic national-identity-forging will-to-power.

But Jesus the Christ rejects this – categorically! That fact is attested to over and over again in the gospels: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over [their peoples], and that their great ones exercise authority over them. It will not be so among you: but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."<sup>21</sup> "Put your sword back in its place."<sup>22</sup> "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"<sup>23</sup>

Welcoming Thursday night's betrayal, Jesus agonised his way to the epoch-making Gethsemane decision to emphatically reject the will to power. Thursday night being the moment of excruciating and transformative decision – it could be said that Good Friday is simply its inevitable outworking. Having sweated and bled his way to the crucial decision in Gethsemane, on Friday he is astoundingly calm in the face of the gathering storm – confronted by mass-minded crowds, murderous religious leaders, and tyrannical imperial powers. We are reminded of that Matthean Jesus' counsel to would-be followers: "Do not worry about ... what you are to say."<sup>24</sup> On Friday we observe the clear and calm voice of One who is already radically free – having already embraced and transformed the betrayal of Thursday night's darkness. "It is accomplished!"<sup>25</sup>

But on Good Friday, perhaps more so than at any other time, it's so easy for the Christian evangel to become trapped in history, or propelled into the sky – or, worse still, stuck in a childish and regressive fantasy that 'Jesus has done it all for us'. This is childish because it springs from the perfectly normal child's fantasy that Daddy will come to the rescue. Herein lies the very great spiritual danger in all those Christian statements, prayers and hymns about 'Christ dying for us'. Atonement must not be confused with infantilism. Salvation must not be confused with rescue. For in this way is our responsibility for transformation of the will to power projected outwards onto Jesus – and thus evaded!

In fact, the baptismal calling to the *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ, does not constitute a mere reverencing of Jesus the Christ – always at risk of being an infantile rescue wish - but what the early Church Fathers called **Qewsis Theōsis**, 'deification', being made like God. "Very truly, 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."<sup>26</sup> The transformation of the will to power first embodied by Jesus the Christ must now be accomplished in each of us.

In this light, the Thursday night's betrayal must of necessity be in the experience of those baptised into Christ's death and resurrection. Betrayal is even to be welcomed! There is here no 'protective orthodoxy', 'beam me up Scotty' escape hatch – no Christendom power to secure our position in the world, no Bible comfort-blanket to spare us from the responsibility of growing up, nor even a Jesus to 'do it for us'. Jesus saves, yes – but not by sparing us from growing up, from becoming fully human. Rather, the way of the disciple is the way of the master: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."<sup>27</sup> "If I, your Lord, and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash

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<sup>20</sup> John 19:15

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 20:25-27

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>23</sup> John 18:11

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 10:19

<sup>25</sup> John 19:30

<sup>26</sup> John 14:12

<sup>27</sup> John 14:15

one another's feet".<sup>28</sup> "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another".<sup>29</sup> "If any want to become my disciples let them... take up their cross..."<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the central ritual actions on this Friday called good: the veneration of a cross; the drinking from a cup. Not a 2000 year old cross dramatically standing on a Palestinian hillside – to be admired from a safe distance. Not a cup which another person drinks for us, instead of us. No, Christ calls each person to take up *their own* cross<sup>31</sup> – to drink *their own* cup. The cross and cup that matter now is that 'garment of fire' – even in the guise of betrayal – by which each person experiences fully that "point of nothingness at the centre of our being... which is never at our disposal", and which, mysteriously, is resurrection life.

Shortly, then, we are invited to make our own 'veneration' at the cross. In doing so, it's crucial that atonement not be confused with infantilism – that salvation not be confused with rescue. Veneration at the cross is an outward and visible sign of an inner and invisible reality which can be known by every person. In the mystery of incarnation, creation continues in us: in this liturgical action we participate in our own agonising decision to reject the will to power, our own experience of betrayal unto crucifixion, our own intolerable shirt of flame.

Later, we make a communion not only with Christ, but with ourselves – suffering consciously the cup of our own lives, drinking to the very last drop the reality of our own selves, whatever each of us is uniquely called to consume. For liturgy is neither an historical melodrama nor a collection of fine and lofty words – but a call to present-tense here-and-now action and embodiment.

Touch and taste – flesh matters. Our flesh matters. The cross we touch and handle is our own intolerable shirt of flame 'woven by the unfamiliar name of Love' – by which we each contributes to the transformation of the destructive will to power. The cup we drink is the cup of our own betrayal and suffering – unto liberation through nothingness – the cup by which we ourselves become dazzling little points of transformative love.

"Very truly, 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".

## *transforming escapism*

### Easter Day

Let's be honest. The Paschal Mystery which comes to completion on this eighth day of the week, the first day of the new creation, is utterly scandalous – a fiery torment to our relentless will-to-power, to dominate and control. And 2000 years on, looking at the news, it might seem that the world remains pretty much stuck in the old will-to-power consciousness.

Though the Church is the faithful guardian of the **euaggelion** *evangelion*, the sacred Christian **musthriion** *mysterion* mystery hidden until now,<sup>32</sup> we know only too well that in the running of its affairs the Church can be just as addicted to power as any of the world's political and economic collectives. All too often the Church-as-institution can itself thwart the emerging Christ consciousness, the gospel being so readily presented as an instrument of power and domination, to protect and defend an institution's possessions, rules and powers.

And on this day, in particular, the gospel is at risk of being presented as though it were an escape hatch from reality, a magic wand – resurrection as Houdini escape act.

The astounding eruption of the new human consciousness revealed in Jesus the Christ has barely begun to be observable in his would-be followers. As Christian divines of every age have recognised, making disciples, baptising people in Christ's name, though worthy endeavours, does not automatically bring about this shift in consciousness.

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<sup>28</sup> John 13:14

<sup>29</sup> John 14:34

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 16:24

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 16:24 and parallels

<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 3:5,9

Yet we should be neither surprised nor disheartened by these facts. How could it be otherwise? For we are in the midst of evolutionary process. Much as the planet's tectonic plates take many millions of years to perceptively move, *from the vantage point of the surface viewer*, thus does human consciousness evolve. The fact that there may *appear* to be no appreciable shift, on the surface, should not fool us, or dispirit us. Easter day stands as a permanent sign – there's no going backwards! Scandalous self-emptying Love *did* erupt on the eighth day, the first day of the new creation; which overcame betrayal; which transformed the dominating will-to-power; by consciously embracing the cruciform nature of reality. And because of that, whenever, wherever this consciousness is embodied in even one woman or man – this is the glory of God!

And Christian history also reveals that this Christ consciousness has indeed broken out in individuals and movements. Those persons who have consented to wearing the 'intolerable shirt of flame' have revealed the same Christ consciousness – a point of nothingness at the centre of their being with the unfamiliar name of Love, which is untouched by sin and illusion, or the will to power and dominate. "It is no longer I who live; but ... Christ who lives in me".<sup>33</sup> This is the evangel in the dawning light of this, the first day of the new creation.

So though we may at times despair the darkness, yet as this sacred Easter Triduum has sacramentally guided us, we *are* living in the eighth day, the first day of the new creation. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, in every era since that great seismic shift this unquenchable and irreversible freedom ignited a consuming fire: "I came to bring fire to the earth".<sup>34</sup> The darkness cannot grasp the eternal Light,<sup>35</sup> collective-mindedness and dominating will to power cannot extinguish the fiery freedom of self-emptying Love – in those consciously willing to pay its necessary price. Every individual who at the font puts on this intolerable shirt of flame is a dazzling light! The folded grave clothes and missing stone and the emptiness of the tomb being outer and visible signs of that inner and invisible new consciousness in Christ *which human hands cannot restrain*<sup>36</sup> – which is "never at our disposal... inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind the brutalities of our own will".<sup>37</sup> "It is accomplished!"<sup>38</sup>

Crucially, this evangel bears wounds – permanently. Resurrection, in the symbols of empty cross and empty tomb, is not an escape from reality, not a conjuring trick. Contrary to that hysterical and aggressive sixteenth century over-reaction, the cross is not in fact 'empty' – indeed, across the entire expanse of space and time God remains the crucified God. In fact, the cross is non-sense when the corpus is removed – surely a denial of incarnation, embodiment. Resurrection does not magic away the 'little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty' which is at the centre of being. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side."<sup>39</sup> Christ the Forgiving Victim returns bearing wounds – a pierced corpus of absolute poverty which is pure diamond, the blazing invisible light of the glory of God, enfleshed!

As those who will shortly gather at the Table of Christ we could say that every person who consumes Christ crucified – who has taken into themselves and suffers consciously that self-emptying Love which is radical freedom – is a living bearer of the same irreversible, evolutionary transformation, a manifestation of Christ consciousness, a wearer of the 'intolerable shirt of flame which human power cannot remove', a bearer of the same fleshy wounds, a transfiguring fire of inextinguishable love.

As Thursday night and Friday declared – and we will shortly reaffirm at the Font this day – the way of the disciple is the way of the master. Atonement must not be confused with infantilism – salvation must not be confused with rescue. Easter Day is not an escape hatch.

We have walked this Triduum together not to remember history, nor romanticise about a Palestinian Jew born of Mary, nor merely even to give thanks to God – though we do these things. But more crucially, in order to reaffirm our commitment to the *imitatio Christi*, to being bearers ourselves of the Christ consciousness, wearers of the shirt of flame which is transfiguring Love: "Very truly, 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".

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<sup>33</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>34</sup> Luke 12:49

<sup>35</sup> John 1:5

<sup>36</sup> John 20:17

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Merton, *op cit*

<sup>38</sup> John 19:30

<sup>39</sup> John 20:27