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**Given Life (Luke 24: 13-35)**

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We are living – liturgically speaking – amidst the aftershocks of Easter morning. The readings set for us each week are resurrection stories – strange, fragmentary accounts of the risen Jesus appearing to his shocked and disoriented disciples – outside the tomb, in the upper room, by the Sea of Tiberias and on the road to Emmaus. And throughout this season of Easter, our prayers and responses also focus on Jesus’ rising from death and the promise that we too may encounter the ‘risen Lord’ and share his ‘risen life’. In all this it seems, the gospels want to communicate that there’s a different quality of life now available to us. A different way of being alive and experiencing life on earth has opened up, a way of being which is described by this phrase ‘risen life’. But what does this really amount to? And how do we come to know it for ourselves, to share it?

A risen life is a given life. We saw this on resurrection morn. Jesus does not raise himself from the dead – he is raised. He is a receiver, a recipient of life on the other side of death. We’re seeing this also in the accounts of the disciples in the aftermath of resurrection. With Jesus’ death, they too have suffered a descent into chaos, the loss of place, identity and meaning. As Rowan Williams has pointed out, in following Jesus they have been drawn beyond their religious and social belonging, stripped of their inherited identities. Yet their longings for power and influence in the promised new age have also come to nothing. When Jesus dies, there’s a sense in which they die too – like Cleopas and his friend, they’re left totally at sea, unsure now what anything means or can be. So, Williams says, ‘any identity, any reality they now have will have to be entirely gift, new creation; not generated from their effort

or reflection or even their conscious desire'.<sup>1</sup> Their encounter with the risen Jesus, as the gospels proclaim it, is that gift to them – a gift that liberates them from paralysis, restores them to themselves and the promise of a future. 'Because I live, you also will live' (John 14: 19), Jesus had promised them. A risen life is a given life.

And this risen life goes on being given and experienced as gift. There's no sense in the gospels that once the disciples encounter the risen Jesus they make of this new life their own possession, or that they carry on now in their own resource. No – what they discover is that to live in this new way – on the other side of the death of their old identities – is to be perpetually a recipient... with no security apart from the generosity and faithfulness of the one who meets them here. And this, I think, reveals the further sense in which a risen life is a given life. For receiving this gift requires that we ourselves be given – given over, given up, our whole selves yielded to the Giver of life.

When we are invited to share Christ's risen life then ... this is what's being asked of us. Not to have a bundle of joy land on us and magically transform our circumstances from painful to easy, but to enter into this quality of being ... this tender, open-hearted, non-possessed experience of being given over and given life.

What brings us or opens us to this state of radical self-giving and receptivity to gift? Sometimes, life itself will take us here – as it did for the disciples ... they got to the end of any capacity to make something of themselves, even to know what they wanted to have happen. They were, perforce, handed over, given up ... and so at last in a condition to receive. But all our discipleship, all our prayer is about enacting this double call to live given lives – lives given over, and lives received as gift. For me, this is what our practice of meditation is fundamentally about. Because, in meditation, it's not just that we're having quiet time, or saying our prayers. It's that through the constant letting go of our thoughts, we actually enact a total giving of ourselves as

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.265-275, p.270.

we give up our self-consciousness. We're letting go of ourselves from the inside, becoming a total receptivity and availability.

This – as we know – isn't easy. It takes courage 'to tread this narrow way' of self-dispossession – part of our resistance to letting go our thoughts and self-consciousness is a kind of fear of what will happen, if 'we're' not there. And if we have suffered some kind of trauma to the self, a dis-integration of the healthy ego, then we may need first to be healed and restored to ourselves before we're able authentically to give ourselves away. This is where the guidance of a spiritual director or counsellor may be important. Ultimately, though, if we are to go with Jesus to the Father, if we are to share his dying and rising to new life, then we must entrust the whole of ourselves to the way. We must be handed over as he is handed over.

It's in this context, I think, that we must understand the core elements of John Main's teaching about Christian meditation. Main says: 'There are no half measures. You can't decide to do a bit of meditation' (Moment of Christ) And again, he writes, 'In the encounter with the absolute we are tempted to hold back. We like to hang on to our familiar illusions. All of us ... like to keep our options open'. But, he insists, 'what seems the demand for absolute surrender is in fact the opportunity for the infinite realisation of our potential. But to understand this we cannot flinch from the fact that the demand is absolute and consequently so must be our response' (The Present Christ).

For Main, this encompasses the question of *how often* we need to meditate (twice a day), *how* we need to meditate (by saying our mantra continuously) and what our meditation is in service of. And here, Main insists that the point of meditation is not primarily to make us *feel* peaceful or at rest (he speaks of the temptation of the 'pernicious peace'); it's not primarily to help us manage anxiety and stress; but it's about leaving self behind, and being drawn into the life of God – available for wherever this adventure may lead.

People sometimes react to this element of fierceness and uncompromisingness in John Main's work. They find his teaching about how to meditate overly prescriptive, and his tendency to downplay the significance of our 'feelings' as lacking compassion or humanity. So let me say something about my sense of this. It seems to me there are clearly other valid methods of meditation – including different uses of the mantra, as in the Centering Prayer approach. It's also true, as Main himself acknowledges, that it can take time (years) to get to the point of really committing to a regular (twice-daily) practice of meditation, and that learning to meditate (that is, to say our mantra and let go all our thoughts) is also a work of years. There is no question of being harsh or punishing ourselves in relation to the time this takes – we are, Main insists, simply, gently to 'begin again'.

Nevertheless, it seems to me there is something profoundly important and necessary about the fundamental lack of compromise in John Main's teaching about meditation – which reflects the fundamental lack of compromise in Jesus' call to discipleship. It is a whole-hearted, embodied yielding to the way, which requires the generous gift of our time and attention. It does mean giving up self-indulgence and the focus on what 'we' are getting out of it – otherwise we remain confined by (possessed by) the demands of the ego-ic self, rather than transformed by our exposure to the reality of the Living One. The paradox is, as Main wrote: 'that this demand is unlike any other demand made upon us. Most demands upon us seem to limit our freedom, but this demand is nothing less than an invitation to enter into full liberty of spirit – the liberty we enjoy when we are turned away from self' (The Present Christ).

A risen life is a given life. The question John Main constantly puts to us is: how much do we really want this? Are we really willing to give up the life we know, life on our terms? Or do we just want to dabble in a bit of spirituality on the side – to consume some peace to help us keep going more or less as we are? We are invited, as longed for lovers and friends, to live risen lives, sharing in Jesus' own tender,

open-hearted, non-possessed quality of being .... broken open like bread and shared for the world. We can't think our way to this way of being or attain it out of our own resources. We receive it as we give ourselves to God in self-surrendering trust ... Let this be our renewed commitment this season of Easter, let this be the fruit of our prayer.