

21 April 2019

## **Why Seek the Living Among the Dead? (Luke 24: 1-12)**

*Easter Day*

© Sarah Bachelard

‘The cross is the great Christian symbol because its horizontal plane is intercepted by its vertical plane and the Christian vision is not a denial of this life, not a denial of history or of time, but an openness to the great fact of history itself, that time has been intercepted by Christ’s love’. These are words of John Main, Benedictine monk, teacher of contemplative prayer. The imagery of verticality and horizontality is a metaphor for the distinction between divinity and created life – and maybe it jars a little. But the basic point, I think, is helpful – the story of Jesus, the story of Easter, is essentially concerned with the interception between God and creation. And one way of relating to the different ways the four gospels tell this story is in terms of which plane they start from, which perspective they emphasize.

Last year, we read the story of Easter according to Mark. This is a version of the passion that emphasizes the human perspective of Jesus – his agonized isolation in the garden of Gethsemane, the nightmare of a midnight trial, the cry of forsakenness and dereliction from the cross. And the anguished feel of Mark’s story continues into resurrection morning. The women who go to the tomb are anxious about who will roll away the stone, and when they’re given the news of Jesus’ having been raised, they flee and say nothing to anyone, because they are afraid.

This year, by contrast, I’ve been struck by the relative peaceable-ness of Luke’s narrative, the sense of a divine perspective infusing the whole. Jesus’ humanity *is* represented – he prays in the garden that the cup of suffering might pass from him, he suffers the mockery of the soldiers and authorities. But in Luke there’s no cry of forsakenness from the cross – instead, this Jesus seems completely confident that he will be this day in Paradise and when the end comes, he lets go into God in seeming assurance: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’.

This eirenic tone inflects Luke's resurrection morning too. The women coming to anoint the body express no concern about who will roll away the stone – they just arrive to find it done. They're perplexed at first not to discover Jesus' there, and then terrified when the men in dazzling clothes stand beside them. But reminded of Jesus' words when he taught them in Galilee, they remember what he'd said about rising on the third day and they find themselves able to share the news with the other apostles (even though these do not believe them, and consider their words an idle tale).

It's tempting, I think, to judge that Mark's way of telling the story is more 'realistic', while Luke's version offers a rosier, more theologically coloured gloss. But I'm not sure that's right – both are making theological points. What matters is to receive the gift of each. And today, I want to draw out a little of what Luke might be inviting us into through his relatively more God's eye perspective on events.

Do you remember back on the Mount of Olives, just before his betrayal, how Jesus had said to Peter that in the days to come they would all be 'sifted like wheat', and that Peter would deny his teacher three times? And do you remember what he added to this prediction? And you, Peter, 'when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers'. It's as though Luke's Jesus can see things whole. He himself is firmly rooted, he knows where he is from and where he's going. But he also knows that his followers are not. They will be overwhelmed by the events breaking upon them, they'll lose their footing and find themselves lost. They will have to find their way back, will have to learn how to be where he already is.

It's the resurrection that opens that possibility for them. Partly that's because it reveals the possibility of a human life, so rooted and grounded in God, that it cannot ultimately be extinguished by anything in creation, by any defeat or failure on the 'horizontal' plane. It's true, as I said last night, that Jesus suffers eclipse, undergoing death and the tomb; it's true that God can be refused hospitality in the world, squeezed out of human lives, rejected and rendered invisible. That's because God does not compete for place with us, 'battling for advantage' in or over against

creation. But in itself, God's light cannot ultimately be put out, God's love cannot be turned. God is, in Hebrew tradition, the Living One. Which is why the women are asked 'Why are you looking for the living among the dead?'

And it seems to me that Luke is emphasizing that discipleship is ultimately about becoming rooted as Jesus was in this indefeasible livingness, this Source. While being fully engaged with creation and our human existence, still overwhelmed at times by its suffering and struggle, we're called at the same time to be connected to a reality that's not finally determined by what happens in the world. This is life lived at the interception of the two planes. And it enables three profoundly important things.

The first is holistic vision – seeing the life of the world in the light of God, and so liberated from being caught up in, threatened or obsessed by penultimate things. The second, directly related, is what St Paul calls 'the peace that passes all understanding'. I've mentioned the sense of assurance and eirenic acceptance in Luke's Jesus; it's the same peace known by Julian of Norwich who, in an era of plague and continuous warfare, could nevertheless affirm that 'all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well'. And the third is hope. Not hope in the sense of wishful optimism, but hope as the will to inhabit the present with trusting openness to God's future, holding open the space of possibility in the face of temptations to despair.

I don't want to be glib about this – to make it sound easy. I'm conscious of how the deep pain of things, how overwhelming circumstances, can eclipse our awareness or sense of connection to this deeper dimension, this 'vertical' plane. But I'm also conscious that we celebrate this Easter in momentous times – it's possible that events will begin to break in on us that are as terrifying as any facing those first disciples – profound disruption of ecological and so of social systems portend. Resurrection, in this context, is no idle tale but is the ground of the faith that enables us to inhabit our troubled world as Jesus did – rooted and grounded in the Source of things, ministers of God's love and call. And you, Peter, said Jesus – when you have

turned back, strengthen your brothers. As we turn again today and ever more wholeheartedly to the risen Christ, may God help us to play our part in strengthening our brothers and sisters, and in the renewal of the earth.