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### **Discerning Appearances (Matthew 27: 1-17)**

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Our theme through the season of Lent has been ‘Touchstones of Redemption’. In light of the lectionary readings set for each week, we’ve been exploring how our tradition presents the process and fruit of the redemptive journey, which is to say the process and fruit of becoming fully human as Christ is.

As far as process goes, the Christian understanding is that redemption is something we must participate in *and* something only God can complete in us. For our part, we must give up the temptation to run our lives apart from God; we must let go defensive, ego-ic, self-securing habits of being. *And*, we must allow what God is bringing to birth. We must ‘be born from above’, must let God’s Spirit vitalise and infuse ours – and this is what our prayer is about, being available for grace at work in us.

To the extent we enter into this redemptive process, our lives begin to bear a certain kind of fruit. We experience, for example, a sense of deepening intimacy with God, ourselves and one another, as was shown in Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. We find our picture of what counts as ‘sin’ being altered. Sin isn’t the fault in others that justifies our excluding them, but is the tendency in us to participate in exclusion. This we learned through the story of the man born blind. And, last week, I suggested that a further outworking of redemption is that our experience of death itself is relativised. With the story of the raising of Lazarus, our tradition testifies that death is not the ultimate horizon of our lives for it is encompassed in the undying life of God. The more we come to know this for ourselves, the more our quality of aliveness is transformed. We live newly unthreatened and free.

And what I've been suggesting is that these shifts in perspective and lived experience are touchstones of redemption. They're what we should expect to be happening in us as our trust in God deepens, as we give ourselves more generously and wholeheartedly to the spiritual journey. And maybe you could take a moment now to notice how these shifts are unfolding in you. To what extent are you aware of a stronger sense of belonging, intimacy, belovedness – in yourself and for other people? Where are you noticing a softening of tendencies to judge or condemn others, less of a desire to exclude and criticise? And how do you notice yourself living more courageously, expansively, less driven by fear and death? All these shifts (however small and incremental) are signs of our being on the redemptive journey; they're signs that our salvation is being wrought in us day by day! And that's an encouraging thought!

Today – we come to the final week of our Lenten journey. It brings us, I think, to one more touchstone of redemption – which is (in some ways) a key to them all. It's the capacity to see things as they really are and to respond accordingly. It's the capacity to discern appearances, to recognize what really is good and true and holy, and what isn't. Immediately preceding the passage we just heard Jesus restores the sight of two blind men, as he passes them by on the road. Those in the crowd had tried to shout them down as they cried for mercy, but Jesus stops in his tracks and asks them: 'What do you want me to do for you? And they say, 'Lord, let our eyes be opened' (Matt. 20: 32-33). It's like a prayer and a benediction on the rest of the story.

And so here we are. Having set his face to Jerusalem, weeks, months, years ago, Jesus enters the city by symbolically enacting the arrival of Israel's true king, as prophesied by Zechariah: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zech. 9: 9). The crowd, recognizing the reference, is exuberant, excited – they're talking about him, wondering about him. Something is unfolding here.

And straightaway, Jesus acts decisively to claim this kingly authority. As Matthew portrays events, immediately he arrives in Jerusalem he proceeds to the temple, where he drives out the merchants and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He then explicitly identifies his judgement upon them as none other than God's: 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers"'. The blind and the lame come to him to be cured – fulfilling another Messianic prophecy (Isaiah 35: 5-6), and he is acclaimed as Israel's king, the 'Son of David', by 'the children crying out in the temple'. When the scribes and chief priests accuse him effectively of blasphemy, 'do you hear what they are saying of you?', Jesus says simply 'Yes', and so asserts that truth is on the side of those crying 'Hosanna': 'have you never read,' he says, "'out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'".

You could hardly get more provocative. It's as if Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, and deliberately incites a politico-religious crisis. It's as if he says to the authorities: 'bring it on'. Now is the moment you have to decide whether I'm of God or not; you've been muttering against me, arguing with me for years. Now is the time to discern the truth. His actions indicate that he deems them mired in 'unreality'. The business of worship goes on, the temple bustles with activity, but it's an illusion of godliness. It's not the kind of worship, the kind of sacrifice that interests God. Jesus is effectively asking the people and their leaders, are you willing to see this for what it is? Are you willing to open your eyes to the real presence of God among you? Or do you prefer to remain oblivious, unrepentant, self-righteous? Time's up; you choose.

And what's striking is that at this point, at least in principle, things could go either way. It's a liminal moment. The authorities are clearly unhappy, but they haven't stopped Jesus from moving about. That same night he goes out of the city, goes back to Bethany, spends the night there. He could still leave. Or they could still change their minds. At issue is the discernment of the truth of things, the real meaning of creation and of God's purposes for Israel. Redemption means being able to see things as they really are and to respond accordingly.

And one way of experiencing the events of Holy Week and Easter is as a drama where our varying capacities to see and choose the real are laid bare. There are those who cannot or will not see – who experience Jesus, not as the Word or the light of God, but as a subverter of the only order they can imagine or desire – he’s dangerous, expendable; there are those – the crowds and some of Jesus’ followers – who are excited about what they glimpse in him of a new truth and freedom, but are then frightened off by the cost of committing to it; there are those who continue faithfully to bear witness to what they’ve seen, though they’re powerless to change the course of events – the women who do not run away, who never betray their allegiance to their Teacher; and there’s the increasingly lonely figure of Jesus, who continues unwaveringly to speak, to be, the truth of God as the shadows lengthen and the rulers of this world conspire against him.

This is the drama we’re invited to enter this week – and it’s not only an historical re-enactment. Always and everywhere, human beings are called to open our eyes and see things as they really are, to discern appearances and grow in our capacity to recognize and choose what is good and true and holy. At times of crisis, this vocation is urgent. Many have said that our current world situation is such a crisis. It confronts us with truths too long suppressed or ignored: the fragility and structural injustices of our economic system; the inescapable interconnectedness of the human family and of the human and natural worlds; the possibility that things really could be otherwise and that we could choose a more abundant and more radically shared flourishing. We too are in a liminal space – things could go either way. And it will matter how many of us can see, choose and commit to the real.

Our faith is that the more we are with Jesus, the more wholeheartedly we entrust ourselves, receive his Spirit and follow where he leads, the more our eyes are opened and the greater our courage. So as we commit ourselves to the work of the coming days, let us pray that our journeys of redemption do indeed fit us to recognize God’s truth in our midst and so offer ourselves, as Jesus did, for the life and healing of our world.