

6 October 2018

A-rising (Mark 14: 17-25)

Viriditas (Pentecost XX)

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One of my clearest memories of Spring as a child was lying flat on my back in our garden in Cook one late afternoon, staring up into the pink blossoms of the prunus tree against a pale blue sky – a sky which gradually darkened as evening fell. I remember the temperature being pretty cool – it was September – but even so the earth against my back was ly-able on as it hadn't been for months, the light lingered at the close of day, and I felt a deep thankfulness. Another memory comes from later, standing at a bus-stop outside my high school and suddenly feeling a warm breeze that carried the scent of wattle. I remember going home to Mum and saying with delight, you can smell the air again! Growing up in Canberra, spring was always a big deal – and I feel it still – that surprising, unaccountable lift in spirits at the warming of the air, the greening of the trees, the strengthening of light.

And yet, spring can also be an ambiguous, teasing season. You think the weather's turned, and then suddenly it turns back. You think it's going to rain, and then it doesn't. As a metaphor for the birth of hope and the renewal of life, spring can be mixed – because the direction, the movement isn't always one way. Palmer Parker has written of how the melting of snow makes springtime in his native Wisconsin a muddy, messy, unbeautiful time of year and he draws the analogy between this ungainly process of renewal in the natural world and the slow, difficult process of emergence from our own 'winters' of the spirit – our emergence from such things as depression, grief, failure, disillusion.

Writing in England, the poet T.S. Eliot famously called April the 'cruellest month', though his emphasis was not so much on the teasing slowness of spring's

emergence but rather because sometimes coming to life again feels more painful than staying numb. This season, he says, mixes:

Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.¹

And sometimes it feels easier to remain buried, aspiring to no more than survival, eking out 'a little life with dried tubers'. Life's renewal isn't necessarily pain-free.

I think there can be another dimension to Spring's cruelty too. We're conscious of it particularly when the season of the year is out of season with our lives. New life may be springing forth on the outside, but inside, we can feel still cold and leafless. Years ago, I met someone whose father had been killed in the Lockerbie air disaster. The bombing happened on 21 December 1988 – winter in Scotland; but when spring and summer came the next year, this grieving daughter was left behind. She said she spent the whole summer huddled in woollens, unable to get warm.

Tonight we celebrate the coming of spring to the earth, the returning of warmth and light, the budding of new shoots around us. But we also want to acknowledge that it doesn't necessarily feel like this on the inside of our lives. Some among us are undergoing wintry times which have not yet 'yielded' or broken forth in blossom. Perhaps at some level they never will. If a loved one or a long-held dream has died, if an illness is chronic or terminal, a relationship has ended, or youth and strength are fading, then whatever 'spring' means it won't be just a straightforward renewal or return of the life we knew before. And that means if we're honestly to celebrate this season, we must somehow be present to the whole of it.

¹ From 'The Wasteland'.

As I was pondering this, I wondered whether there was something we might do to honour this mixed experience. I wanted us to share a ritual action that would acknowledge where we and those around us may be still in 'winter', while also inviting our openness to the gift and joy of new life, even if we have no idea yet how that could manifest. I wanted something that would help us be present to the whole of it. And then I remembered, that's what the Eucharist, that's what Holy Communion, is about.

When Jesus instituted this ritual meal, the times were as muddy and ambiguous as any Wisconsin spring. On the one hand, there was the tentative emergence of fresh life, greening. Jesus had spent three years inviting his disciples to open their hearts and imaginations to a whole new set of possibilities for human being and belonging. And they've caught the scent of it on the air; the light within them has strengthened and they're increasingly liberated from old constraints. They're daring to believe in some radical renewal of life. And yet, these shoots of new awareness and possibility are profoundly fragile. The disciples are constantly drawn back to dead and outgrown forms of the old season. They remain stuck in rivalry with one another; they resist letting go their old sources of security and constantly misperceive what the transformation underway.

In the upper room, there's exactly the potent mixture that T.S. Eliot identifies: 'Memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain'. Peter's confused yet hopeful; Judas is conflicted and about to sell out; others are inattentive and uncomprehending. Jesus himself faces the inevitability of his betrayal and death – an even deeper winter lies ahead for him. And yet, so also does spring. Because, for all that he must undergo death, he does so while rooted in inexhaustible life, the life of God which no darkness can ultimately obliterate, and no dying extinguish. He dwells in the energy of what Hildegard of Bingen called '*viriditas*' – the very aliveness of life that is the being of God. Which is how he knows resurrection in advance of his death:

‘Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God’.

When we re-enact this meal, all this is re-presented in and among us. We’re invited to recognise our own experience – the mixture within us of death and life, part of us clinging to or overwhelmed by fear, hurt and old patterns, part of us open to and longing for new life. We’re offered bread and wine, symbols of Jesus’ life and of his unbreakable connection with God’s life. By prayer and the Holy Spirit these symbols are energised to communicate this reality. This means that, by faith, as we eat and drink, we receive a share in the power that was in him to undergo the deepest winter without being ultimately disconnected from the source of life.

Martin Luther said that the resurrection is testified to by every leaf in spring time. The celebration of communion is about receiving the energy of resurrection life inside of us, joining us indefeasibly to God’s greening no matter what. For in the words of Hildegard,

The Spirit of God
Is a life that bestows life,
Root of the world-tree
And Wind in its boughs.
Scrubbing out sins,
She rubs oil into wounds.

She is glistening life
Alluring all praise,
All-awakening,
All-resurrecting.

As we share this meal, may we know this life burgeoning within and among us all.