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The Great Reversal (Matthew 28: 1-10)

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Over the past few days, in these gatherings for worship, we have been participating in a great work together – what the early church called ‘the liturgy’, the ‘work of the people’. For many today, this work, this commitment to meet to share word and silence, song and prayer, seems unfamiliar, even odd. And when you think about it, it *is* odd. After all, what is the point of gathering so solemnly to reflect on abstruse texts and difficult events long past – to make ourselves feel miserable on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, only to be exhorted to feel suddenly happy and joyful again on Sunday? It can seem as though this liturgical performance is a kind of make believe, a religious game we struggle to find relevant amidst the urgencies of life on planet earth in the 21st century.

Except that, more and more, I’ve come to sense that this work of the liturgy is essential. It’s not make believe, but a way of inhabiting in a concentrated way the deep structure of reality and of learning what it means to live responsive to it. This Easter especially, celebrated in quasi-lockdown, while the world is consumed by the impacts of pandemic, I’ve felt it acutely – how the events of Christ’s passion, and the liturgy that remembers it, tells the truth and helps us make sense of our lived experience, in such a way as to change and liberate us all.

Looking back, we can see how far we’ve come. On Thursday evening, we gathered on the brink, telling the story of the crisis about to break on Jesus and his followers. It was a crisis that had been building for a long time; the hostility of Jesus’ opponents had been growing, as had the misperception of his meaning even among his disciples. Jesus himself wanted to bring things to a head. That night, it all spilt over – Jesus was betrayed, taken captive, and brought before the authorities. By Friday morning he was condemned, and during the course of that day it became increasingly clear how deep the shadow in human nature delineated by his light; how

violent, how ruthless humankind can be when feeling threatened. We watched him die, then, alone, seemingly utterly defeated, the supposed Word of God silenced. And yet, at the very moment of this death, when all was apparently lost, there was also a strange sense that something had shifted decisively. According to the gospel of Matthew, the earth quaked, the rocks split, the tombs were opened. Could it be that something was yet taking its course? But by yesterday, a long and empty Saturday, it was as if this hint had come to nothing after all. Jesus was simply dead; his body sealed in the tomb. The few followers that remained had nothing left to do but hang about, pointlessly, in the rubble.

And it strikes me that up till last night, the parallels between the events we've just lived through liturgically and our world's current plight are uncanny. As if the paschal mystery participates in and recapitulates a deep and recurring pattern in human experience. It shows us, for example, that the more truth is avoided and injustice perpetrated, the more tension and instability grows. A situation becomes inherently unsustainable – it can't go on like this. And whether it's a relationship, an ecosystem, or a world economic order, at some point, a tipping point is reached. The crisis must break.

When it does, a kind of dying gets underway. And the process of this dying reveals ever more clearly the dynamics that were at work all along. In the case of Jesus, his dying made visible the violence previously only half-noticed around him. In the case of the current pandemic, the disproportionate suffering of the poor reveals ever more starkly the injustice built into our world system; while the dying of the system itself reveals illusions on which we've based our way of life. And even though this is terrible and frightening, there is at some moments almost a sense of relief. The foundations are being shaken and at last the truth is seen, offering a tiny glimpse that things could be otherwise. But then, it's as if the sheer magnitude of the dying, the confusion at the loss of the old order (however unsatisfactory it was), overtakes us. Like the disciples at the tomb, no one knows the way out of this ending; all of us are waiting on events, hanging about in the ruins.

Like I said, the similarities are uncanny. But this Easter morning the liturgical mood shifts and here the usefulness of any parallel between the paschal journey and our world's crisis seems abruptly to cease. For here is the point at which, against all reason and expectation, the liturgy bursts out with news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And this seems an unlikely solution to a pandemic. Certainly, if a church or world leader were to proclaim in the papers today, 'it's OK everyone, we just need to sit tight – Jesus is coming to save us', we would rightly roll our eyes. Earlier I claimed that what we have done together over these days is to inhabit the deep structure of reality in a concentrated way, and to learn what it means to live responsive to its truth. But is this true of the celebration of resurrection? How does news of Jesus risen from the dead connect to anything in the real world, or help to make us real?

Well, before I have a go at that question, let me offer three preliminary comments. First, it seems significant that in the gospel stories, news of resurrection dawns upon you, only as you stay faithful to the fact of the death. It is to the women who return to the tomb that the angel comes. And this suggests that when it comes to resurrection, you cannot 'process skip'. You cannot refuse the dying, or avoid the space of emptiness and unknowing, and expect to undergo fundamental transformation.

Second, it seems significant that Matthew distinguishes between the occasion of the women first receiving news of Jesus' resurrection and the occasion they encounter him risen for themselves. The angel announces the dawn of a new future, but it was as if they had to trust this intimation of it and begin to act in accordance with it, before they experience its reality. Third, and finally, even at the point these women encountered Jesus himself and received his instruction to reconnect with their community in Galilee, they had no real sense of what any of it meant, how they were now to live, who they were to be. Yet the posture they find themselves spontaneously adopting is a posture of humility, kneeling at Jesus' feet; and the practice that spontaneously erupts is a practice of worship, of thanksgiving and praise.

So – that’s something about how people come to hear and respond to the news of resurrection. But is the news itself true? Is our celebration real – or is it just make believe? Well, what do you experience? What intimations have you received? Our world is facing a dark time – we may be just at the beginning of it. Many of us struggle personally – with the loss of those we love, anxiety about the future, fears for health, grief for the planet. Does the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection touch any of it, really? Does it help us inhabit our days?

These are questions the liturgy puts to us today. For myself, I find I can now answer ‘yes’. ‘Yes, it does help; yes, it is true’. It’s taken quite a time to get here – years, in fact, between first hearing the news and encountering the reality for myself. Quite a lot of hanging around near tombs, trying to ‘be’ where I found myself. But now it’s as if, despite everything, in the face of everything, I’ve been touched by an abiding sense of hope, a deep and inexplicable knowing that God remains with us and for the earth, that God’s Word, God’s meaning will in the end hold true. And the difference this makes? Well, it creates courage, and opens into vocation.

When Jesus died, according to Matthew, there was a great earthquake. Today, with the arrival of the angel announcing the resurrection, there was another one – almost like an echo, an aftershock, of the seismic shift already underway. This great earthquake signifies in Christ a fundamental realignment and re-footing of the world’s possibilities. He is risen. It has happened. Today we celebrate and give thanks for this great and surprising reversal. We fulfil the liturgy that sends us out renewed to play our part in realising its truth.