

16 April 2022

Waiting Expectantly for the Kingdom of God (Luke 23.50-57)

Holy Saturday

© Sarah Bachelard

I've just started reading a book from a new series published by the English think-tank *Perspectiva*. The series title is 'Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds' and there are contributions from philosophers, political and legal scholars, social theorists, economists, educationalists and spiritual thinkers. The basic premise of the book is that we're living in a time of overlapping crises – Covid, climate, democracy, late capitalism – not to mention the suddenly increased risk of nuclear war.

Each one of these issues is complex, each takes us beyond what we readily know how to be and do. And each poses a real question about whether humanity will prove capable of acting wisely and in concert to save ourselves from self-destruction. In fact, says series editor Jonathan Rowson, 'there's a real chance we might screw it all up'.¹ Yet at the same time, he goes on: 'there are many scholars, mystics and visionaries who see the chaos of our current world' as signifying that something is reaching its limit, its end. 'What they see in the world today is the necessary and perhaps even providential dissolution of our existing' way of seeing, understanding and relating 'so that another way of seeing, being and living can arise'.

Meanwhile, however, we live in a time between worlds – a time when many of our social structures, ways of knowing and forms of life are proving inadequate to reality, but whatever's coming next has not yet emerged or taken form. We live, in other words, in what Jewish philosopher George Steiner called 'the long day's journey of Saturday'. It's like the day between cross and resurrection, between dying and rising, without any guarantee about the shape of things to come.

¹ Jonathan Rowson, 'Tasting the Pickle' in *Metamodernity: Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds*, ed. Jonathan Rowson & Layman Pascal (London: *Perspectiva Press*, 2021), p.22.

This Easter, we've been following the story of Jesus' passion as told in the gospel of Luke. One of the themes that's struck me in this rendering of events is Luke's emphasis on the promised coming of the kingdom of God. As if what's being wrought by Jesus' self-giving through death is a new world order – the emergence in human experience of a new set of possibilities for being. And I've been wondering about the connections between this story and our current experience of the time between worlds. About the wisdom we might glean for how to live here and now.

Over the last couple of days, we've seen how Luke's Jesus seems conscious that he is forging a passage for us between different realities or ways of being. On Thursday night, for example, as he sat down to the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus spoke of not eating it 'until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God', and again of not drinking of the fruit of the vine 'until the kingdom of God comes'. On Friday, standing before the council, he says that 'from now on' he will be seated 'at the right hand of the power of God'. And everything he says and does thereafter comes from the perspective of someone inhabiting a different reality than the default systems of this world. He dies, apparently unshakeable in his sense of being sourced in a life beyond: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'.

The disciples have so far failed to catch on or to follow where he leads. But now it seems that someone else has caught a glimpse of the new and truer world's emergence in these events. Joseph of Arimathea is said to be 'a good and righteous man'. And despite the fact that Jesus has died, despite the apparent failure of his life's work and the scattering of his followers, Joseph seems to perceive in what has unfolded... what? God at work? Some sense of life's meaning coming clearer? The whiff of possibility? Whatever it is, it's enough to draw him out of his old pattern of relating, his former belonging. He was a member of the council that handed Jesus over to Pilate, though (says Luke) he had not agreed to their plan and action. But now it's impossible to imagine he would ever be seen by his peers, his community, in the same way again. His compassionate and generous response to the crucified Jesus

represents a decisive shift in his identity ... from now on he must be in the world differently.

So what is it that leads Joseph to act in this way? To respond to what appears to be an ending, a death, in a spirit that creates conditions for the emergence of newness? Luke describes him as having been 'waiting expectantly' for the kingdom of God, and I wonder if it's his 'expectancy' that's key. Expectancy seems linked to a fundamental trust in possibility. It's a disposition that encourages or tends towards the fulfilment of hope, of promise, but it has an open-hearted texture. Expectancy is not fixed like expectation; it's not a demand that things look or turn out a certain way. Rather, it's a way of being that's humble, attentive, other-directed, receptive. Joseph could have had no clear conception of what he had been and was still waiting for. But it's as if *the way* he waited allowed him to perceive the events of Jesus' crucifixion and death with the eye of the heart, and so gave him the part that was his to play in the unfolding of God's re-creative purpose.

What wisdom, then, might we glean from Joseph, as we too wait longingly for the kingdom of God, for the renewal of life and peace on earth? Jonathan Rowson writes: '*Something* or perhaps *somehow* is emerging. It might be impending disaster that looms. But our growing awareness that the first truly global civilisation is in peril is also an active ingredient in whatever is going on. Therefore', he says, the most important *action* we can take – and it is a kind of action – is cultivating the requisite qualities of perception and awareness'.²

This is what we practise tonight. Here at the tomb, we wait in the face of what seems hope's extinction. We wait without knowing what we're waiting for. Expectantly, we wait.

² Rowson, 'Tasting the Pickle', p.22.