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**Veriditas on the cross (Luke 23.33-43)**

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On the recent retreat in Alice Springs, one of the participants tried an experiment. At the top of a rise, behind Campfire in the Heart we were shown some dead looking foliage, brown and shrivelled. We were told that after it rains what looks dead comes alive. The participant took one bit of dead shrivelled foliage back to Campfire in the Heart, where she soaked it in water. After two days or so it was transformed. It was vibrant green, unfurled, alive. Curiosity spurred wonder at what seemed a miracle.

We have just heard of Jesus hanging on a cross dying, being murdered by the state, alongside two others. This does not seem a promising start for exploring the greening. Veriditas, the greening power of God is a word used by Hildegard of Bingen meaning vitality, fecundity, lushness, verdure, or growth.

And here we are with three dying men, and their witnesses.

There is a lot of mocking and putting down. Three men are dying, and those in the crowd, leaders and soldiers and spectators, distance themselves with derision and comic relief. Some no doubt mourn, quietly.

The leaders and then the soldiers yell out something like "you say you are the Son of God, well prove it, do something about it". "We don't quite believe it but part of us hopes there will be a spectacle", they think. You can hear the echoes through the crowd. It is a most uncomfortable scene. Then one of the dying men, a man being crucified beside Jesus joins in the rhetoric, "Come on man, get on with it, get us out of here."

Jesus is silent. He has walked his path, he has asked forgiveness for them. I see no rancour, no judgement, only understanding and compassion. In his life he has stood up to injustice, he has healed those in need, he has challenged authority and now, here, he's dying, the inevitable consequence of his actions, of his radical love, you might say.

Linda Pepe writes:

'Crucifixion was not an execution method for common criminals- it was reserved for enemies of the state. Crucifixion was saved for people the Roman Empire wanted to make examples of- people who had committed crimes like insurrection-civil disobedience- treason. That's why Jesus was crucified.'<sup>1</sup>

Not a pretty picture of God or the Son of God, dying accused. It might lead us to despair. 'It is the end', we might think, 'its all been a waste of time' we might conclude.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theologicalstew.com/today-you-will-be-with-me-in-paradise-luke-23-33-43.html>  
Rev. Linda Pepe

Then, the other bloke up there, also dying, challenges the man on the cross beside Jesus, "what are you going on about? We deserve to be up here. We're dying man. This one as far as I can see didn't do anything wrong. He stood up for justice and peace and love and truth. He unsettled the powers that be". This man turns, with sweat running down his face and gritted teeth from the pain and says, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom". This man seems to get it, this greening power, life force, in his last moments of life he turns to the one connected to the divine and says something like, "I'm in with you, Jesus, I want to be part of this greening." And Jesus says "yes, we're in this together, today you'll be with me in paradise, the garden of Eden, you'll see."

Viktor Frankl with the wisdom of a concentration camp survivor muses:

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."<sup>2</sup>

Now with these thoughts and this story in mind, we turn to Veriditas, to spring, and greening. Spring is not my favourite season, I prefer autumn, season of mist and mellow fruitfulness.. spring is too bright..too young and tender and fragile, but not this year, this year it feels very dull,... and grey and green, sooo green.. someone said to me, "things keep growing because of all the rain and we can't control them". There is growth coming out of greyness, the greening comes.. And it also comes in our reading. It happens on the cross, on the way to death.

Christine Valters Paintner associates the season of spring with mornings and with breathing in, and the East.

Whatever time it is in your life there is always, while you are alive, an *in breath*. Each morning, each spring, each *in breath* there are possibilities as we experience this season of the year, this season of our lives and what it is to *breathe in*, to awaken each day, to open to the morning sun, even when we're dying.

One of the retreatants at Mittagong offered a symbol of her experience:

*..it chose me- leaves from the well manicure/coiffured photinea in different stages of their life span. Some were nibbled, dried, and one like polished burgundy leather. Then there were tender fresh leaves holding unopened buds. The interweaving of stages in the life cycle. All encouraging for obvious reasons ...*

In this spring in the Southern Hemisphere in this la Niña weather pattern, there is greening, there is growth in abundance, and the bumper crops are spoilt by too much rain and the harvesters cannot get into the fields, there is flooding, and we are reminded that things are awry. And some are thrilled by the replenishment of the river systems. There is hope and growth, and there is fear and loss.

What season are you in at the moment? Some in this community who have recently turned eighty see this as the best season of their lives! The greening.

James Finley shares his thoughts on spiritual maturity or veriditas as a form of ripening:

*..As a person ripens in unsayable intimacies in God, they ripen in a paradoxical wisdom. They come to understand God as a presence that protects us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things. This is the Mystery of the Cross that reveals whatever it means that God watches over us; it does not mean that God prevents the tragic thing, the cruel thing, the unfair thing, from happening. Rather, it means that*

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<sup>2</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

God is intimately hidden as a kind of profound, tender sweetness that flows and carries us along in the intimate depths of the tragic thing itself—and will continue to do so in every moment of our lives up to and through death, and beyond.

As fruit ripens, it fulfils itself in reaching its full potential to nurture us and give us pleasure. We might say that, as fruit ripens, it fulfils itself in giving itself to us. In a similar way, we do not undergo the transformative process of ripening for ourselves alone, but rather that our transformed presence might be a source of nurture to others.<sup>3</sup>

(As we reflect on spring, on our mornings on the rising of the sun, on veriditas,  
What is possible? What is growing in me? Where is my passion rising?  
What is God inviting me to? Where is life for me now?

Answers may change, but the questions are the same.

And where is aridity, dryness, death and dying?

Both are part of life, but where do we focus? Especially in spring?

Acknowledge and name the aridity, the dryness, the death and dying, and, at the same time look for where there is life.

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life:

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."<sup>4</sup>)

And Jesus responds...

"Father forgive them because they don't know what they're doing".

"Today, you will be with me in paradise..."

Forgiveness and inclusion, they are the only words Jesus spoke.

I do wonder though, why did one man on the cross get it, and the other not? Was it to do with their personalities? Their histories? The choices they made during their lives? They were both dying for being brave or stupid or seditious, standing up to an oppressive regime. Why this moment, and not before? Was it Jesus' silence? Or was it those words of forgiveness that did it? We will never know, but the questions hang there.

If it was me there, which part would I take? One on the left, or the one on the right?

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<sup>3</sup> A Windfall of Delight: <https://cac.org/author/james-finley/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.deanyeong.com/article/fight-two-wolves-inside>

Where do you place yourself? Yes, notice, you are not judged, but seen with the eyes of compassion and forgiveness, and if you are willing to lift your eyes a little, you are invited into the greening.

A poem by Ellen Bass *The Thing Is*<sup>5</sup>

to love life, to love it even

when you have no stomach for it

and everything you've held dear

crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,

your throat filled with the silt of it.

When grief sits with you, its tropical heat

thickening the air, heavy as water

more fit for gills than lungs;

When grief weights you like your own flesh

only more of it, an obesity of grief,

you think, How can a body withstand this?

Then you hold life like a face

between your palms, a plain face,

no charming smile, no violet eyes,

and you say, yes, I will take you

I will love you, again.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Thing Is" by Ellen Bass in MULES OF LOVE (Rochester, NY: American Poets Continuum Series, No. 73, 2002), e-book location 865. found at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/151844/the-thing-is>