

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER- 4th May 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am

Solemn Eucharist Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 11-18; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Luke 24:13-35

“Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognising him” (Luke 24:15b, 16). It’s only three days since they were all at a meal together, during which Jesus told them to “Do this in remembrance of me” and already they’ve forgotten. “Their eyes were kept from recognising him.”

Someone says, “I don’t understand religion. I don’t understand why anyone would want to spend Sunday mornings in church. Where’s the evidence for God in any case? I tried praying and nothing happened.” Well if the large crowds here at the Cathedral over Holy Week and Easter are anything to go by, quite a few think it’s worth spending time here. But there were still more people not here than were here. Why is that? How come we get it and they don’t? Are we more intelligent and they’re just daft? “Their eyes were kept from recognising him.”

Dame Iris Murdoch was an Irish-born British author and philosopher who wrote novels about good and evil, sexual relationships and morality and the power of the unconscious. In *The Red and the Green* she writes of Barney, who’s filled with sexual inadequacies, has known academic failure and whose private journal is filled with self-justifying reflections. It’s during an Easter Mass that Barney experiences a key moment in his liberation from self. He learns that he’s not the focus of the world; that it’s not all about him.

This transformation, this conversion, occurs as a shift in his thinking from the cross to the empty tomb. “. . . it became clear to him . . . that it was the risen Christ and not the suffering Christ who must be his saviour: the absent Christ hidden in God, and not that all too recognizable victim. He was too horribly, too intimately connected with his own degraded image of the Christ of Good Friday. Easter must purge that imagery now” (Iris Murdoch, *The Red and the Green*, Chatto & Windus 1965, Penguin Books 1967, p. 230).

Rowan Williams, writing about this says, “Christ crucified too readily becomes simply the God of my condition” (Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2003, p. 69). So I look at the cross and I see God sharing my suffering. “Jesus as victim is the image of myself as victim. God, making himself a victim in the death of Jesus, affirms *me* in my suffering: he is . . . the ‘fellow-sufferer who understands’” (Williams, p. 70).

To see the cross as making sense of my suffering is fine, but Williams says there’s a risk of turning the cross into a defence of my position, a legitimization of an ideological purpose. “God is identified with *my* cause, because he is identified with my suffering: the cross is the banner of my ego – or the banner of a collective ego (think of the crusaders riding with banners emblazoned with the image of the cross). If I suffer I am in the right, because God ‘endorses’ my pain” (Williams, p. 70).

This last week we heard news of the breakdown of peace talks between Israel and Palestine. Politicians are questioning whether the two-state policy ever has a chance of succeeding. We see there this dynamic of victim and oppressor: both sides saying they're the ones who are oppressed, the other side is the oppressor. Quoting Williams again: "I am crucified, *you* are the crucifier; I am victim, you are oppressor; I am innocent, you are guilty. The path leads alarmingly to the statement, 'My suffering is deeper, more significant than yours'; and thence to, 'Nothing I inflict upon you is of comparable significance to what you have inflicted upon me'" (*op cit.*).

A logical outcome of this is terrorism, whether it takes the form of toxic family relationships or strapping explosives to oneself or kidnapping people and holding them hostage. What the world never seems to learn is that any form of violence and terrorism will only lead to more suffering instead of transformation of human relationships. What violence does is to make it impossible for me to recognise my neighbour. My eyes are kept from recognising him/her.

The transforming, liberating message of Easter is that I cease to see the cross only as mine but also as belonging to the one I don't recognise, viz., a stranger. Iris Murdoch's Barney recognised this stranger and was able to then move beyond his distorted Good Friday view of the crucified simply reflecting his own condition back to him or to see him simply as a martyr for his own cause.

The women who went to the tomb on Easter morning were looking for the corpse of a martyr. What did they find? 'You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified . . . he is not here' (Mark 16:6; cf. Matt. 28:5-6).

So, finding he's not there, we go on our way, and find that we're joined by a stranger. Peter identifies this stranger to the crowd in our first reading from the Acts today, "this Jesus whom you crucified" has God raised up. When I encounter the raised Jesus I am confronted by myself as complicit in the crucifixion. As Williams says, "Pain is not simply what I endure, it is equally what I transmit" (*ibid.* p. 72). I am just as capable of causing as well as experiencing pain. If I fail to recognise that, I am saying I'm a class above the terrorist, the ideological crusader. They're almost another species, and an inferior one at that. "My involvement in violence is most destructive when least self-aware, and simply understanding that involvement is a crucial first step. But to understand it in the presence of the Easter Jesus is to understand that violence is not omnipotent, and that my involvement in it does not rule out the possibility of transformation of my relations" (*ibid.* p. 73). And that's what God calls us to.

Jesus will not be party to the way our world works. We come seeking his validation but we're told he is not here. That sense of absence overturns our ways of enlisting Jesus for our cause. 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). So now perhaps Jesus may join the ranks of martyrs; become a symbol of Israel's hopes and aspirations.

Cleopas speaks these words to someone he doesn't recognise – a stranger. He then finally recognises the stranger as he breaks the bread.

This lack of recognition of Jesus is strong evidence against both the fundamentalist and the liberal explanations of what the resurrection actually means. The fundamentalist view of the resurrection as basically the resuscitation of a corpse would require a sameness in the appearance of Jesus and consequently an immediate recognition of him. The liberal view of the resurrection as the projection of the disciples' yearnings and imagination and belief makes no sense as Jesus rebukes Cleopas for his failure to see how the Messiah must go through this process of death and resurrection. This was the last thing they were expecting. "Jesus is not raised by our faith, but by God's prior act" (Williams, p. xv).

When we gather at the Lord's table we come to realise like those disciples on the road to Emmaus: Jesus is not what we thought him to be. We're confronted with the same sense of absence and loss that the resurrection engendered in them. Then when we realise who the stranger is, we realise our initial expectations – what we thought we came here for – is inadequate. Something dies in us; something new is brought to birth. Like Iris Murdoch's Barney, we have to surrender the desire for the ego to be in control. In the Eucharist we are confronted by our victim and are able to identify with him. We realise the remaking of ourselves is an ongoing process as we encounter the stranger repeatedly as we walk along the way.

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