

March 30, 2008

Listen for a moment to a horrifying little passage from a book by the Christian theologian, Miroslav Volf, citing the testimony of a Muslim woman who suffered in the wars following the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia:

I am a Muslim, and I am thirty five years old. To my second son who is just born, I gave the name "Jihad". So he would not forget the testament of his mother -- revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, "may this milk choke you if you forget." So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me no pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Iljas and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbour, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: "you are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman..." I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad... and kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad -- war. This is the only way...¹

The intensity of humiliation this woman describes is something which very few, if any, of us have ever experienced. And yet we might understand how such an experience can lead to the hatred and the hunger for vengeance which has sprung up in her heart. It grows not simply from the fact that she has been so appallingly treated but that those who did this had been her neighbours, her students and, perhaps, those she might have considered friends. The impulse to destroy arises from having, in a sense, been destroyed when that is the *last* thing which should have happened.

I don't believe it goes too far to make a positive comparison between this woman's humiliation and that experienced by Jesus on Good Friday, with all the obvious qualifications. And yet consider preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost to the Jews in Jerusalem. One of the things which struck me about Peter's remarkable

¹ From Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation. Nashville, Abingdon 1996.

sermon is the way in which he weaves together Jesus, God and the actions the religious leadership have taken.

2:22 *"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.²⁴ But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.*

Peter then concludes, after a couple of proofs from the Psalm we will sing in a little while,

2:36 *Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."*

Peter's sermon makes a very strong link between the crucified Jesus and those who brought his crucifixion about: *"this Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Messiah"*. Given the nature of Jesus' death – the extraordinary humiliation of the death on the cross – what is God now to do? Within Jewish apocalyptic literature around the time of Jesus, there was a strong theme which held that in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, those who have been downtrodden unjustly would sit in judgment over their oppressors. The end of the world was to be pay-back time. Today few of us hold to early Jewish apocalyptic, but we basically agree with the sentiment. We

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have a small reflection of this sense of justice in our modern "victim impact statements", made at the time of sentencing a convicted felon. We come closer to a feeling that justice has been done when victims have an influence on the treatment of those who have hurt them. If we

recoil at the force of the hatred in the words we heard at the beginning of this sermon, we understand and agree that "something must be done..."

And yet, this pattern of retaliation to hurt – what we might call the normal human desire to bring to account, to hear and prove the charges, and to make the oppressor pay for the damage done –all of this is missing from Peter's preaching of the crucifixion of Jesus and the response of God. Although Peter pulls no punches in laying before the religious leadership their culpability in the death of Jesus, this charge is not made as a threat of punishment for what has been done. Rather, an *invitation* is being made: recognise that you have been blind in your treatment of this Jesus; for what you accounted as worthless God has exalted, that every knee might bow and tongue confess *Jesus* as Lord and Messiah over all. Contrast this with the response of the woman to her tormentors, and our similar responses, if perhaps more moderate than hers, to those who in one way or another have hurt us. In this contrast we approach what it means to say that "this Jesus" has been raised up.

We all know well enough the challenges which talk of resurrection poses to us today; "doubting Thomas" is secretly the hero of most Christians at one time or another. These particular challenges, of course were scarcely any less confronting for those in the time of Jesus. They knew, as well as we, that the dead stayed dead. But there is another more tangible, concrete and historical aspect of the talk of resurrection which scarcely catches our attention, and yet is as difficult for us as is talk of a dead man waking.

I remarked last week that the faith of the church is not in the resurrection *per se*, but in the continuing presence of the risen, crucified Jesus. A couple of conversations during the week indicated how rather formal and theoretical – even "academic" a statement this is. Fair enough!!! But it can be made more concrete in this way: the point of the New Testament's talk of the resurrection is not simply to assert that a dead person stopped being dead. It is of the *utmost* importance that the one who stopped being dead was the one who had been *accounted* as worthless, and *so* crucified.

"Jesus is risen" is, then, not merely a scientific problem; it is *just as much* a pressing moral and ethical problem for those who killed him. Theologically, the question which the talk of resurrection originally posed was this: of all the candidates for resurrection in the history of Israel, why would God raise this impious heretic? Why raise the one who dared to say, "you have heard

that it was said..., but I say to you... "Why raise the one who happily mixed with tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers and other outcasts and undesirables? Why raise the one who reportedly threatened to tear down the Temple? Peter's preaching taps into the extraordinary suggestion, not that God can raise the dead but that, *of all people*, God has raised *Jesus* of Nazareth.

The news of such an event, then, imposes an extraordinary and very much unexpected situation: Jesus, the one unjustly killed, rightly stands *in judgment* over those who killed him. This is the cutting edge of Peter's sermon: Jesus died, you killed him, and God has raised him from the dead. This being the scenario he presents, the appropriate response to the sermon is, then, not to "believe in the resurrection" but to *repent*. The resurrection of Jesus is only something worth "believing" if it involves such a repentance.

This is the situation for Peter and those to whom he preached on that first Pentecost Sunday. The good news of Easter is not that "Jesus is risen"; the good news is that the risen Jesus does not return to his persecutors with destroying vengeance, but rather with an unmerited gift of forgiveness. To *experience* the good news of "the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus" is not that, with a bit of luck, we might come to have a mystical sense that Jesus is somehow floating around the place, or present in some other vague and non-specific way. There is nothing "spiritual" here, in that sense. The presence of the risen, crucified Jesus is the revelation of a very real and specific human failure, coupled with forgiveness from the one who has been failed: "this Jesus, whom you crucified".

Now, if you have been keeping up with me to this point, perhaps you've noticed the problem all this creates. The power of Peter's preaching is that those to whom he preaches are those who are directly

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culpable of Jesus' death – those to whom God attested concerning Jesus with deeds of power, wonders, and signs (2.22).² The response of those who heard was one of desperation: "what

² Peter's address is very general - to the "entire house of Israel". This is scarcely does justice to the original situation; "Israel" in Peter's sermon refers to those too, because of their status in the community, "stand for" all of Israel in a representative sense.

then shall *we* do?" (2.37). What of all the rest of the world, who were not there, who do not fall under the label "Israel"? What has the death and resurrection of Jesus to do with us? Or, to link the question to the point of last week's reflection: where, or what, *is* the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus, here and now?

Many of you attended the performance of John's Stainer's *The Crucifixion* here [at Auburn] on the evening of Good Friday. One of the things which struck me were the words of the congregational hymn "Jesus, the Crucified, pleads for me".

2. Lord, *I* have left thee, *I* have denied,
Followed the world in *my* selfish pride;
Lord, *I* have joined in the hateful cry, Slay
him, away with him, crucify! Lord, *I* have
done it, oh! Ask me not how...

And then Jesus responds:

3. Though *thou* hast left me and wandered
away, Chosen the darkness instead of the
day; Though *thou* art covered with many a
stain, Though *thou* hast wounded me oft
and again: Though *thou* hast followed thy
wayward will...

Perhaps Christians are used to this way of thinking but, when we give it a bit of thought, the suggestion that *I* am guilty of the crucifixion is an odd one. And it doesn't help to muse that, "Well, I too probably *would* have demanded the crucifixion, or run away, or driven the nails, had I been there". There is nothing much to be said for what *I* "would" do –

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whether good or bad – if I had the chance. The power of Peter's words resides in the link between what *has* happened and the involvement in that of those to whom he speaks. "Jesus is risen" has its most pressing significance for those who have his blood on their hands.

This being the case, we might well imagine that believing (or not believing) in the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus, *today*, has something to do with the blood *we* have on *our* hands – whether literally or metaphorically. And it has something to do with forgiveness given, or withheld, for the spilling of that blood *by the one whose blood it was*. To reduce it to the barest possible declaration: There is no forgiveness, and no

reconciliation with God, and so no resurrection, if there is no coming together of people who are at enmity with each other – victims and oppressors, however complexly those identities might be intertwined; this is what the resurrection of Jesus "means".

There are many more things which should be said about this, but time is short, and this much will have to do.³ To believe in the risen Jesus is to believe, not in life *after* death, but in life *before* death, for this is what the message of the risen Jesus brought to those who knew not what they had done – and so have not known themselves, and so might as well be dead. The reported response of the people to Peter's sermon is most likely hopelessly idealised and exaggerated, but this doesn't negate the point. The good news is not that we are forgiven – or not merely that. It is rather that it is forgiveness, and not vengeance, which brings into being that justice and peace we so desperately seek in our righteous retaliations.

The risen, crucified Jesus is present when the story of *his* gracious and forgiving return to *his* persecutors opens up *for us today* the possibility that we too might turn in grace and forgiveness to those at our left and right, and they to us, Just so, the body of Christ, broken and given to us, recreates us as "the Body of Christ"

Well, then, do we speak when we pray, that by the grace of God in Christ we may we know, and become, forgiveness in the life he has given us. Amen.

³ For example, there is the very real problem of the person who seeks forgiveness but does not receive it, or who offers forgiveness but the offence is not admitted. In terms of the readings set for this Sunday, the ongoing sense of "you are *receiving* the outcome of your faith – the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1.9) touches on this problem: the persecuted believers to whom Peter writes are, just so, not reconciled to their neighbours (through no fault of their own). Consequently, they are living between the time of utter brokenness and consummation, bearing the marks of Christ's own suffering in their lives (e.g. 1 Peter 2.19-25).