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Palm C

Sermon notes on John 12.16

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ON LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND

*'His disciples did not understand this at first (that is, the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem); but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him' (John 12:16)*

If I were to claim that this is the most important verse in the gospel, if not the whole of the New Testament, I could scarcely hope to be taken seriously. So why would I propose what must seem an odd text on which to lay such significance?

The simple fact is that this is a verse about how to get at the heart of Christian faith. If it were to be taken seriously, a whole lifetime of a certain way of dealing with the Bible would come to an end. Or to put it positively, by means of a verse like this, new dimensions offered to faith would emerge. In a sentence, it invites us to reflect more deeply about what are the sorts of things that can really be known about the gospel.

At any rate, we can't avoid the truth that these first disciples were initially bewildered in a way that we usually aren't. We think that the facts in front of us are sufficient. Remember how most of us grew up singing as children: 'I wish that his hands had been placed on my head, I should love to have been with them then', the implication being that if we had had a 'hands on' experience, faith would be absolutely straightforward. This text says no - that's not right. For the fact is that being on the spot for these disciples proved to be an actual liability. Following Jesus around Palestine was no guarantee of understanding the point. That is why they were required to undergo a transformation of understanding, and that couldn't happen until all the returns were in about Jesus and his end.

The gospel this morning makes the issue quite clear. What is actually in front of their eyes as it is taking place is a mystery - Jesus riding on a donkey, the crowd waving branches, and a good time generally being had by all - *all this needed something to happen subsequently for it to be understood*. That 'something' is what the gospel of John calls Jesus being 'glorified', a word which this gospel prefers to resurrection.

The relative freshness of 'glorification' helps to open up for us some new perspectives. For one thing, in this gospel, Jesus being 'glorified' is tied to the achievement of his earthly end, and more particularly to his cry from the cross which, alone

in the four gospels, is a cry of triumph: 'It is finished'. But the more significant fact for our purposes this morning is that if it is to be 'glorification' that will usher in a new future, it is equally the case that his glorification is needed to throw its light *backwards*, not simply onto the present moment, but, even more surprisingly, onto Jesus' otherwise concealed past as well.

This unveiling from 'future' to 'past', rather than our usual way of moving from 'past' to 'future', should not really be so difficult for us to comprehend. It was Soren Kierkegaard, a significant Danish philosopher and theologian in the C19, who has said something that we can all relate to, namely that 'while life must be lived forwards, it can only be understood backwards'. Or, coming closer to home, we might remember the historian Manning Clark's continual refrain in his autobiography *The Quest for Grace* - that he wanted 'to be there at the end in order to understand what it has all been about'.

This must surely be one, if not the greatest, gift of growing old, namely that the nearer we get to the end, the more the trajectory of our lives takes on a shape that is obscured from us while we have been living it. Only as we get closer to the end does what happened 'in the beginning' make sense, whatever be the moment that we choose to locate as our beginning.

Of course, it is the same, if not with all stories, then certainly with all mystery stories, that the writer works backwards. The ending is known, while the story is designed to arrive at that ending.

In the same way, if we know the point of Jesus and his end, then this is the real moment of disclosure. This is why although the Palm Sunday story this morning helps us to get to the *historical* end of Jesus, the actual *meaning* of his life, its real significance, is hidden from us until a wholly unanticipated moment of revelation.

The point then is this: just as our own history only makes sense when read backwards, so too does *the history of Jesus need to be read backwards not forwards*. Hence the import of our text:

*'His disciples did not understand the entry into Jerusalem at first but when Jesus was glorified, they remembered that this had been written of him, and had been done to him'*

The truth is that this being 'glorified' is the only way that we have of encountering Jesus. In other words, if we do not have Easter Day, we do not have Jesus at all.

Once we have been alerted to this necessity of 'reading backwards', we see it taking shape most clearly in the way that the liturgical celebration of the Church year operates, most strikingly right at its opening. For the very first thing that Advent offers us is an end, not a beginning. Farewelling the year that has concluded, the new calendar opens, not with an announcement about the birth of a Messiah, but with texts about the end of all things, or if you like, about seeing for the first time 'what it has all been for', to cite Manning Clark again.

It would be all too easy to overlook this significance. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and so on – it all looks like what we might expect, a forward momentum, each apparently building on a known past, laid out like a row of bricks.

But it's not really like this at all. Let me briefly recall the texts for the first Sunday in Advent last November to make the point: the OT reading of Jeremiah 33: 14 which begins: 'The days are coming when I will fulfil the promise' and then in the space of two verses, two more: 'In those days...', which is code language for things yet to happen. This is a text about a future disclosing a past. Or take the Epistle; 1 Thess. 3:9 ff about establishing 'unblamable hearts before the *coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Or the Gospel, what we call the little Apocalypse from the Gospel of Luke (21:25), about the signs of an end time starting to take effect in the present.

Advent, then, before it is anything else, is about 'finality'; it is about 'conclusion'; it is about understanding backwards. It is about returning from the 'future of Christ' to his past. It is about how all of history, especially the history of Jesus, is to be understood. But all this so easily gets lost for us in the hype of Christmas, of what we take to be a proper beginning - the apparently uncomplicated familiar pattern of a biographical history – a baby's birth, his infancy, his unfolding ministry, his execution - all there, it is supposed, for the immediate taking.

So what is our point this morning? The point is that the gospel is all about the reversal of time. That is simple to say, but more difficult for us to achieve. This is why I say that mature Christian faith requires considerable unlearning. And this would be as useful an exercise as any for our current little band of noisy atheists beating their rationality drum, but who have yet to learn that there is more than one variety of rationality on offer: that 'reason' does not equate with a bundle

of facts, just as 'faith' has never, ever, meant blind credulity.

At any rate, this transposition of future and past proposed by our text will go on to explain why the post-resurrection stories in the gospel tell us why Jesus has to do all over again all that he did in his ministry, since *it is only now that what he did then can be understood* – so, for example, *this side of the Cross* he promises to meet them again in Galilee where it all first began; or he meets them cowering behind locked doors; or he walks with them on the beach while they go fishing as if nothing had changed from the first time they did this; or he encounters them walking on the road going in the opposite direction.

The point of such stories is this. Before his death, that is, with only the data of his ministry, the disciples didn't have a clue what it was all about. Only after his 'glorification' could they make any sense of him and his ministry.

And if this was the condition for those first disciples to come to any understanding, should we really expect anything different for ourselves?

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