

‘WISHFUL’ THINKING AND THE RESURRECTION

The Fourth Sunday after Easter

Texts: Daniel 6.6-23; Mark 15.46-16.8

On this Fourth Sunday after Easter, and prompted by our Second Lesson this evening, I’d like to reflect with you on why it is that I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead.

But before I talk about *why* I believe, I’d better first make clear *what* I believe. And I have to do that because, in modern times, many theologians and church people have, I think, suffered from a loss of nerve.

Instead of viewing the story of the Resurrection of Jesus in traditional terms as an *account* of something that happened to *Jesus*, they have read it as a fictional or mythical *expression* of something that happened in *the minds of his disciples*. No longer was the Resurrection seen as an objective event in which the bodily person of Jesus—crucified, dead, and decaying—was rescued from the jaws of death and transformed into a new kind of life. Instead, it was seen as a psychological event in the minds of his disciples, in which post-Crucifixion disillusionment and despair was (somehow) transformed into faith and hope.

What precipitated this psychological reinterpretation? Well, a conviction that the traditional story was no longer credible. After all, ‘modern’ people know that the world is governed by physical laws that *cannot* be violated. So the dead *cannot* rise. Resurrection is *a priori* impossible.

What is more, ‘modern’ people know that history is governed by the law of common, immediate, contemporary experience. The present must be the measure of the past. Since *we ‘moderns’* have no first-hand experience of resurrection, we may not credit second-hand testimonies that reach us from the ‘primitive’ or ‘medieval’ past. Resurrection is *a posteriori* incredible.

In recent times, however, this ‘modern’ view of the world and of history as strictly regulated and uniform has begun to weaken its grip. Philosophers of science have observed that what are called—perhaps even miscalled—the ‘laws’ of nature are really only patterns or regularities. They don’t so much *prescribe* what should or *must* happen under *all* conditions, as *describe* what *does* happen under *normal* conditions.

And why should ordinary experience have the authority to outlaw *extraordinary* experience? Why presume that my limited experience—or yours—should be the measure of what history has thrown up? Why should there be no space in history for the genuinely—and stupendously—*novel*?

The reigning cultural assumptions, which once made many theologians and church people feel the need to reinterpret the Resurrection story psychologically, no longer rule in quite the way they used to.

Which is fortunate, since the psychological reading of the story suffers, as far as I can see, from at least three internal flaws.

First, to say that the story is a fictional, mythical *expression* of the disciples' suddenly revived hope doesn't explain what the ground or substance of that hope is. If Jesus was not actually rescued from death, then what is the *ground* of this hope—and, indeed, what is it actually hope *for*?

Second, if Jesus was not actually rescued from death, then whatever faith and hope came upon his disciples is really no consolation for us mortal beings who face what appears to be our ultimate annihilation.

And third, the text of the Gospel stories of Jesus' Passion, death, and Resurrection do not read like myths or fictions created to express the mysterious revival of a supposedly natural faith and hope.

So: I believe, not in the spontaneous revival in the disciples' despairing breasts of groundless faith and hope, but rather in the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth bodily from the dead. That's what I believe. But why do I believe it?

Well, I don't believe it primarily as the conclusion of a philosophical argument about the character of the 'laws' of nature, the possibility of miracles, and the probability of a certain kind of God bringing about a resurrection.

Nor do I believe it primarily as the conclusion of an historical argument about the credibility of the apostolic witnesses.

These support my belief, for sure. They help to sustain it. But they didn't give rise to it.

No, I believe in the Resurrection primarily because I *want* it to be true. I want it to be true, because it gives me ground on which to hope that death doesn't have the final word. And I don't want death to have the final word, because it destroys all that I have come to admire as most precious in the world, and because it brings to naught all that I have come to hold most worthwhile.

So I *want* the Resurrection to be true: that's the main reason why I believe it.

Now, of course, wanting something to be true doesn't make it so. Badly wanting something to be true doesn't give me the right to believe it. Strength of will or desire doesn't amount to a ground or reason. I know that. It was the German social theorist, Max Horkheimer, who once said that just because it's too awful to suppose that generations of slain innocents will

never see justice, doesn't give us warrant to believe that God is coming to their rescue at the End of Time. The monstrosity of Final *In*justice doesn't mean that it ain't so.

Well, that would appear to be true. And yet I wonder. I think it's missing something. What it's missing I find quite hard to articulate. But here's a start.

There are two different kinds of wishful thinking. One is magical thinking that would make the world serve one's selfish purposes by force of will or imagination or ritual. This wishful thinking is childish, immature, and egotistical; and what is wished for is often trivial.

But the kind of wishful thinking that I'm talking about, and which I own, is—I suggest—altogether more serious, more grave, more weighty—and it's born, not of childish, foot-stamping egotism, but of a very grown-up love for human persons and their flourishing.

The hope for the raising up and restoration and fulfillment of human persons beyond death is born of love for things that are intrinsically precious. It's as if their damage and destruction and death naturally appears to us as a kind of sacrilege, as a deep wrong that must be righted.

The desire, the hope for the resurrection of the dead and the vindication of the innocent is an extension of the logic of love. It's not merely that death isn't wanted. It's more that death just doesn't make sense. It isn't rational.

Loving what is true and good and beautiful makes sense. Loving what deserves love makes sense. But the death of what deserves love just doesn't. Death not merely frustrates us; it baffles us.

Now, these are rather abstract bones. So let me now put some flesh on them by quoting from the aptly named *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson. Here she reflects on a bereavement:

'You'll get over it ...' It's the clichés that cause the trouble. To lose someone you love is to alter your life for ever. You don't get over it because 'it' is the person you loved. The pain stops, there are new people, but the gap never closes. How could it? The particularness of someone who mattered enough to grieve over is not made anodyne by death. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no-one else can fill it. Why would I want them to?

I've thought a lot about death recently, the finality of it, the argument hanging in mid-air. One of us hadn't finished, why did the other one go? And why without warning? ... The day before the Wednesday last, this time a year ago, you were here and now you're not. Why not? Death reduces us to the baffled logic of a small child. If yesterday why not today? And where are you?

Fragile creatures of a small blue planet, surrounded by light years of silent space. Do the dead find peace beyond the rattle of the world? ... I raise my head to the door and think I will see you in the

frame. I know it is your voice in the corridor but when I run outside the corridor is empty....

The fluttering in the stomach goes away and the dull waking pain. Sometimes I think of you and I feel giddy.... All the things we did. And if anyone had said this was the price, I would have agreed to pay it. That surprises me; that with the hurt and the mess comes a shaft of recognition. It was worth it. Love is worth it.

Jeanette Winterson recognizes that death calls love into question. By destroying the beloved, death implies that love was mistaken, misdirected, disproportionate. The beloved really wasn't worth it. Hence love's bafflement.

In the end, however, Winterson, wagers on love. Or rather, she finds herself arrested by an epiphany—a revelation—of love's logic: “with the hurt and the mess comes a shaft of recognition. *It was worth it. Love is worth it*”.

Another woman novelist follows the logic, I think, one step further. Quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph* some years ago, Jill Paton Walsh said: “In the presence of death, [the reality of an afterlife] seems more possible.... If you do see someone dead, the *absence of someone* is quite striking. You are left with the question: “If she is not there, *where is she?*”

The logic of love resists the logic of death. Love's faithfulness to the beloved and its persistent respect for their preciousness, leads it naturally to

deny that death is the final word, and to hope that the dead do find peace—lively peace—beyond the rattle of the world.

So it's in this sense that I *want* the Resurrection of Jesus to be true, and that I therefore believe in it: as a token of the eventual fulfillment of all that I have come to recognize as precious. My wanting is not, I think, childish or willful or desperate. It is, rather, the natural extension of love, impelled by the intrinsic value of what love embraces.

I might be mistaken, of course. The world might be so designed as to cause love to lead us by the nose into hope, only to have death turn around and make fools of us. It could be so. Only the End of Time will tell.

But in the meantime, I'm trusting in the logic of love. It's by far the more beautiful logic. And, after all, in banking on it, what is there to lose?

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