

Westcott House
Compline: 26 April 2007

On Good Friday, in Leicester a public Passion Play called "Christ in the Centre" attracted 7,000 spectators. It culminated in a resurrection appearance, with Christ appearing in glowing white robes to a great burst of applause from the crowd. In a celebrity culture this is how we tend to think about the resurrection. And in a celebrity culture this is how we sometimes think about the renewal of the Church. There is a hunger for something spectacular – something which attracts the crowds – something which evokes applause – something which is exciting, eye-catching and newsworthy.

The resurrection appearances in the gospels were for the most part not like this. Mary Magdalene in the garden; the pair walking to Emmaus; the disciples by the Sea of Galilee – all describe something much quieter, more ambiguous, more intimate and perhaps ultimately more demanding.

In St John's account of the appearance by the lake, Jesus stands on the beach just after daybreak. And in this at first half noticed appearance three things strike me from the gospel account.

1. The question, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" In any competition we might write for the first words spoken by the risen Christ to his disciples, these words might not feature in most people's entry. This is an extraordinarily practical, down to earth, everyday concern. It is about the food which Peter and his friends had spent most of their life catching. Of course we can surround it with all kinds of metaphorical, spiritual, theological meaning, but taking the words at face value, as they are, it is about eating – the most fundamental bodily function. That is what Jesus in his risen power speaks to us about.

During the latter part of Lent and Holy Week and over Easter, a friend and colleague of mine has been diagnosed with cancer. We have been doing what we can to support him through treatment of a particularly painful and difficult condition. Conversations have been about hospital visits, chemotherapy, x-rays - how many times he can go to the loo. We reflected the other day that 90% of our conversation has been about this extraordinary physicality of his condition – the ordinary, routine, everyday and problematic functioning of the body. Yet this is where the Lord appears.

And this is where so much of our Christian ministry takes place. It involves taking the trouble to notice what is really happening to the people to whom we are called to minister. Taking the trouble not to spiritualise or theologise away the real earthed sensations perhaps of illness, or of growth, or of struggle.

2. Jesus says, "Come and have breakfast". Once again the crucial encounters, the crucial discoveries, the crucial experiences of relationship with the living Christ take place at a meal-time. The longer I spend in public ministry, the larger the proportion of my time appears to be sitting round tables with people in front of piles of paper. The demands of institutional management are potentially overwhelming. So recovering the kind of meeting that is Christ-centred, requires recovering the art of hospitality – of learning to give and receive around the shared table where it is not the business of the Church, the needs of the organisation or institution, the interminable demands of a sometimes frail Church that is the life-giving experience of ministry. Rather it is a sharing of food – which you do in this college – and the conversation about the world to which it gives rise.

3. Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" In the end, this is what has to be tested in the one who is going to be given responsibility for establishing the Church. It is what is tested in each one of us. The Church has its own way of asking questions of us

- are you committed?
- do you understand?
- are you mission shaped?
- are you orthodox, sound, clear?
- are you capable, stable, balanced?

These and a thousand other questions in criteria for selection, for pathways to ordination, capability procedures, procedures under the Clergy Discipline Measure, ministerial review procedures, clergy terms of service guidelines. We are not short of questions which are put to those preparing for ordination, but at the heart of the question here is one which transcends all the others and which in the end really is the only one that matters. Do you love me?

And it seems to me that in Peter's struggle to answer that question are contained two further sets of questions.

The first is this; are you beginning to understand who you are, where your fragilities lie, and how sophisticated is your capacity to deceive yourself? We need to allow the crucified and risen Lord to reveal the truth to us about ourselves. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" but cannot hear an answer because it means discovering his own emptiness. The emptiness of the whole power struggle he represents is challenged. For him truth is what works, what has the desired effect, what keeps the system going (not so different from the way some people regard truth within the Church). To discover a new kind of truth is too daunting for Pilate; too threatening to the empire founded on power. In their different ways the disciples, Mary Magdalene and others in the gospel story have to face the unsettling, disorientating and discomfoting fact of the truth they can no longer avoid.

All of us are asked by the risen Christ the question, do you love me? The higher up the hierarchy we go, the more probable it is that we will want to protect ourselves from part of that question because it involves being discovered for what we truly are. Public ministry has a capacity to blind us to our own hypocrisy. Of course we cannot discover the whole truth about ourselves and certainly not do it immediately. We can, however, notice the loose edges of our camouflage beginning to dismantle; the places where it doesn't quite match its surroundings; where a certain troubled consciousness reminds us that we are being less than truthful about who we are.

And we cannot do this alone – as you know in this community we need each other if our frailties are to be revealed to us and our freedoms are to be found. We have to learn to exercise our shared priesthood in community with each other and with the people amongst whom we minister. The days of "rugged individualism" are over in the parish system. We are learning more and more that we can only be true to who we really are, we can only answer the question, "Do you love me", if we are in relationships of love and trust – especially with our brother and sister clergy with whom we are partners in the gospel. Those who are seeking alongside us to help others to come to terms with that question.

Secondly, if we are to find our true selves, discover the source of the love that is within us, we need to be relieved of the burden of the false assumption that the future of the Church depends on our efforts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his inauguration sermon in 1933 these words:

"It is not we who build. Christ wills to build the Church. No one builds the Church but Christ alone. We must confess – he builds. We must proclaim – he builds. We must pray to him – he builds. We do not know his plan, we cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are times of collapse, are for him great times of building. It may be that the times from a human point of view are the great times for the Church, are times when it is pulled down. It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his Church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province".

"Do you love me?" The question is about where we place ourselves and our concerns in relation to God's purposes for him and for his creation. The seduction of public ministry is subtle and cumulative – gradually it can feed the assumption that upon our efforts, our virtue and our perception depends flourishing of the Church and the communities which we serve. St Peter had to be brought to the place of recognition that all he has to offer is his love and the rest is gracious gift.

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