

Sunday 30 March 2008: Second Sunday of Easter

After Easter

Readings: Acts 2.14a, 22-32; John 20. 19-end

The traumas and the excitements of Holy Week are very hard acts to follow, and that it's not surprising that we call today Low Sunday, but what I feel particularly aware of this year is the urgency of what follows on from Good Friday and Easter. Yes, they are the twin pivotal points on which the whole of Christianity is based, but what happened afterwards, and what is still happening, matters just as much. What were the crucifixion and the resurrection for? Has what they were for actually materialised? What needs to happen, and to go on happening, to make what they were for stick?

But first I want to tell you a cautionary tale. When Communism collapsed throughout Europe in 1989 and 1990, only one Communist leader managed to survive in power, and that was Slobodan Milosevic. And he managed to survive by jettisoning his Communist ideology and adopting a completely different one, the ideology of Serb nationalism. 1989 also happened to be the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, the battle in which the Serbs were defeated by the Turks, and in which Serbia's hero leader - Prince Lazar - met his death. What Milosevic did in 1989 was to open up Prince Lazar's tomb, to exhume his body, and to parade it around Serbia's principle cities of Serbia so that everybody could see it, and by doing this he was able to whip people up into a frenzy of aggressive Serb nationalism by proclaiming that their defeat in 1389 needed to be avenged. As a strategy it was brilliantly successful, despite the battle being six centuries old, and despite the Turks having had no presence in Yugoslavia for more than a hundred years. And in the wars which followed, over two million people died.

It is very easy to look back on the large swathes of human history, both before and after the crucifixion, and to see them in terms of an endless series of conflicts, conflicts between individuals, conflicts between groups, conflicts between nations. And what has underpinned all these conflicts has been the conviction held by both sides that they are the ones who in the right, and that their opponents are the ones who are in the wrong and who therefore deserve to get taken on and defeated. And it's never very difficult for the representatives of both the sides in these conflicts to come up with very plausible justifications, both for the rightness of their own cause, and for the wrongness of the cause of their opponents and, during the course of these conflicts, yet more wrongs get perpetrated which one side sees as being justified in the circumstances, and which the other side see as yet more evidence of the need for their opponents to be opposed. And thus the endless cycle of conflict goes on and on.

The purpose of the crucifixion was to bring this cycle of conflict to an end, and it did this twice, in two very different ways. One of the most remarkable things about Good Friday was its unanimity. Jerusalem at the time was, in every sense, a divided city. There were the Roman authorities personified by Pilate, there were the Jewish secular authorities personified by King Herod, there were the Jewish religious authorities personified by Caiaphas, and within the Jewish population there were all the different religious sects, and there were also the nationalist freedom fighters whose aim was to get rid of the Romans. But on Good Friday all these different factions were united in wanting Jesus to be killed, and the spectacle of his violent death, as a sort of sacrificial victim, brought about a temporary healing of their divisions. But it was a healing which could only ever have been temporary, both because the unanimity brought about by blood-lust can never be permanent and also because all the underlying reasons for the conflicts remained unaddressed.

What united everybody against Jesus on Good Friday was that everybody felt threatened by the message which he had been preaching. His message had been that people should put aside all the things that separate them, and that they should love one another, and everybody had found this message threatening because they had vested so much of their identities in the things that made them different from one another. The occupying Romans were there to keep the Jewish population under control, but if the Jewish population had stopped needing to be controlled the Romans would have found themselves out of a job. The Jewish religious authorities were there to uphold the Law, but if the new Law which Jesus had been proclaiming had become a reality, their whole *raison d'être* would have disappeared. And so on. Everybody needed the causes of the conflicts to continue. And one of the big temptations for us, when we listen to the Passion Story, is that of identifying villains (who was the most to blame in bringing the crucifixion about?), because when we do this we ourselves start sharing in the blame; we start defining ourselves as being in the right, and somebody else as being in the wrong, and this is a recipe for the conflict being perpetuated.

The message of the crucifixion is that what matters is what people have in common, and that differences need to be set aside, despite the tendency that we all have to vest our sense of our own identity in what separates us from other people, and to define other people as having got it wrong. On Good Friday Jesus was killed as a sacrificial victim, but this in itself was by no means unique because there had been thousands of sacrificial victims before him, and there have been thousands of sacrificial victims since; ganging up against a sacrificial victim is a tried and tested mechanism for bringing people together, for example in the way that Milosevic in 1989 brought all the Serbs together by proclaiming the Muslim Kosovars as their common enemy. But there were three things which made the crucifixion of Jesus special. One was that he allowed himself to become the victim and willingly accepted his death, and he did this because he fully understood that if he were to offer any sort of resistance this resistance would become a part of the conflict and would therefore perpetuate it. The second was that he forgave the perpetrators, because he fully understood that if he had defined them in any way as being in the wrong this too would have perpetuated the conflict. And the third thing, and this is the bit that is important for Low Sunday, was that there were other people around who were able to understand what was going on, not very many other people, but enough.

After the crucifixion there were two possible courses of action which Jesus's disciples might have been expected to follow. One was that they might have given up, and knuckled under, and disappeared from off the scene and out of history, and the other was they might have fought back, and the first post-Easter miracle was that they did neither. First of all there was the empty tomb. Because the tomb was empty, there was no way in which Jesus's mangled body could be used as a rallying point for a fight-back, in the way that Milosevic used the mangled body of Prince Lazar. And then there were the post-resurrection appearances, in the course of which the disciples came to appreciate the cosmic significance of what Jesus's death had represented, the cosmic significance of the victim's willing acceptance of his suffering and of his fate, and the cosmic significance of forgiving of the perpetrators. In the story of doubting Thomas in today's Gospel reading, what Thomas is usually thought of as having doubted is the reality of the resurrection, but there's also another way of looking at it which is to see him as having doubted the reality of the crucifixion. Could the innocent Jesus really have been killed in the sort of way that he had? The answer was yes, and to prove it Jesus showed Thomas the reality of his wounds.

And perhaps the most important post-resurrection appearance, certainly from the point of view of Christianity's extension beyond the immediate circle of Jesus's followers who had known him before the crucifixion, was the conversion of St Paul. Paul, or Saul, had had the job of suppressing the early Jesus-cult in order to make sure that it didn't continue to

undermine the authority of the Jewish religious leadership, but what he suddenly realised was that the answer to the conflict was not yet more suppression, not yet more perpetuation of the vicious cycle, but the Jesus-solution of recognising the victim's love for his victimisers, and of ending conflict through forgiveness and through the dissolution of differences.

The post-resurrection appearances were essentially private experiences, but the disciples also went public. They started trying to explain their understanding of the crucifixion and the resurrection to the authorities and to the people. The first was St Stephen, who was called before the Sanhedrin where he explained to the religious leaders the meaning of the whole of Jewish Law in a completely new way. He looked at it from the perspective of the victim, instead from the perspective of the authorities in punishing the victim. But the authorities weren't ready to listen to all this, and Stephen was taken out and stoned and, like Jesus, he died forgiving his persecutors.

And Peter does the same sort of thing in the passage from Acts. He contrasts Jesus with King David, and quotes David as having said "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool", and of course this is a recipe for perpetuating conflict and not for ending it, and he goes on to point out that David's tomb is still there in Jerusalem, whereas Jesus's tomb is empty.

So, given that the crucifixion happened nearly two thousand years ago, why is it that conflicts are still going on, between individuals, between groups, and between nations? The answer is that human nature is still what it used to be, and that Jesus's message is still a very difficult one to take on board, including even by the Christian Church. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not". During Jesus's lifetime "his own" meant the Jewish people, and in the past that statement has been used as an excuse for anti-Semitism, which is yet another example of uniting people by blaming others. But "his own" nowadays means the Christian Church, and the Church is still engaged in naming and shaming groups and individuals who it thinks have got it wrong, and who therefore deserve to be punished. The Low Sunday message is that we need to persevere in our efforts in identifying with the victim in all the conflicts that we ourselves are party to, and we need to do so in ways which involve neither knuckling under nor fighting back, but are based on what Jesus taught us, absorbing all the hurt which has been inflicted, and forgiving the perpetrators.