

Facing 2012 ... A backward and forward look at 'THE SEVEN DAYS OF THE CROSS'

In my earlier outline, 'Facing 2009' (<http://www.passion.org.uk/documents/Facing%202009.pdf>) I suggested that resurrection, or the fourth day of the cross, might be the narrative for 2010. One thing that characterised the response to this was the overwhelming desire to leap forward into the day of resurrection. After all, resurrection is THE great Christian hope and without it we are of all people the most miserable. Resurrection defines us and it vindicates us. The one we follow has not left us comfortless; he has come back to us and proved that he is the overcomer, the conqueror. We are therefore associated with triumph, with deliverance and power. This is what we want to experience and the world to know; so it is no wonder that we all wanted to dive into 2010!

But as we entered this resurrection period we needed to have asked what a contemporary manifestation of resurrection would look like. We are given biblical clues and the patterns of former cycles of historical and spiritual development to help us. We must see how these cycles reach the 'fullness of times' with amazing potential for a new generation body-of-Christ that is relevant and empowered for the need of its day and different from what went before.

So today's body must have begun to be radically changed by the Sabbath, or the third day of the cross, that goes before the resurrection day we have just lived, that I suggested in the link above, was the narrative for 2009. The Sabbath was to be a time of stillness, when all former hopes, fears, muddled motives and received wisdom were supposed to drop away into that dark place of silence, as they did for Mary and the women at the first resurrection.

It is the self-serving expectations that we, as today's disciples, read into the resurrection narrative that must surely drop away now since they have been distorted by so many conflicting, and often bizarre theologies developed through the church age. The working of preservatives into an embalming paste to guard and keep what we had before will also prove pointless. We are to look for something we won't naturally recognise, to live something we won't immediately welcome.

The invisibility of the Jesus we thought we knew

For me, the discipleship of 2010 and onwards was, and continues to be, about the invisibility of the Jesus we thought we knew. In the accounts of the resurrection Jesus was occasionally seen by the women, or some of his disciples who aren't named. However the eleven 'refused to believe' this sight. The eyes of the two men on the Emmaus road 'were being prevented from recognising him', but when they finally did, the eleven 'did not believe them either'. When the Lord does suddenly appear to them it is to rebuke them for their unbelief in not believing the others, and Thomas is told, 'Blessed are they who did not see, yet believed'.

It seems that the context in and the means by which Jesus is to be known has changed significantly and it seems too that he expected them to know this. The disciples were told to look for him in Galilee: 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him; look, I have told you!' Disciples of the resurrection were and are called to see him in a new way, in Galilee 'of the nations'. On this developmental journey we should now be looking for the spiritual effects of our risen Jesus among the nations, for the unusual effects of a newly disciplined, changed - though perhaps still a little confused - spiritual body of Christ in all of creation!

Two new challenges

It is, however, our response to the next two key narratives which will massively affect our ability to interpret rightly what we see among the nations, which I suggest are the two challenges facing us in 2011 and 2012. They are revealed in the next steps, or what I have termed 'days' 5 and 6 of the journey through the cross.

DAY FIVE: THE DISCIPLESHIP IN GALILEE

Of course it is a little late to describe what to expect last year (!) but I hope the first narrative may resonate and interpret what has been our corporate journey, strengthening us for the bigger challenge of the coming

year; it is also an eternally significant challenge and one to be faced now if not considered earlier. It is the challenge to Peter in John 21.

Nothing will be the same again

Like Peter we are discovering that all we have believed to be unchangeable has changed totally. This is both marvellous because, if there is faith for this, it is a potentially new resurrection-style beginning of all we have known. But it is also terrible because, even so, it leaves us wondering what on earth it means for us and how do we work it out?!

The particular challenge I believe we face now is realising that the implications of the present paroxysms in our world really are changing things irrevocably. Not much will ever be the same again. Our first response to such a growing awareness is a kind of paralysis - 'he appeared to the eleven *as they were reclining* and reproached them'. Then this is often followed by an overwhelming desire to return to the familiar where we know how things work - 'I'm going fishing!'. Martin Scott shared a strong dream last year with a similar warning and it is one we surely must hear (<http://3generations.eu/blog/?p=3020>).

Struggling towards a total metamorphosis

I honestly believe we, in the UK and among the European peoples particularly, are on the cusp of what could be the most amazing spiritual awakening in our history. If you have read my stuff before, you will know I will not call it revival, as that is something that we have had, tasted and lost already. Like the narrative of the five loaves with 12 baskets left over and the seven loaves with seven baskets left over, I believe to keep looking back and longing for what we have already known leads only to the law of diminishing returns as well as the danger of pharisaism - this was Jesus' own warning. We should instead look for a resurrection people that rise out of the deathly cocoon of previous understanding and sight. Though good in its time, our past understanding was and is partial.

Now we must struggle forwards for a total theological, ecclesiological, social and political metamorphosis. 'Something greater is here' ahead of us if we are willing to eschew the familiar. I understand and sympathise with the many calls to prayer that God help us to return to our roots and history as a 'Christian' nation with good moral and family values, but I do believe 'something greater' is dawning upon us.

I can sense and feel the same pull towards re-establishing law and order on the streets and equally long for such justice to be meted out to the greedy rich and the rapist global financiers. But I truly know 'something greater', though presently much more fragile and demanding of us, is already growing up among us.

Our Peter narrative shows us the intense need for an immediate shift of motivation, from the safety of what he, and now we, knew and understood to the challenge of unconditionally loving the resurrected and radically unsafe Jesus who said 'someone else will gird you and bring you where you do not wish to go'.

A watershed and a challenge to love

This year the people of God have been asked the same question that Peter faced at that beginning of the rest of his life: 'do you **love** me? Many of the expositions of this encounter struggle with analysing what kind of love Jesus is asking for (agapao? phileo?) Could it actually be facing the challenge to love people simply as a brother is what radically tests Peter*? It was when Jesus questioned his ability to do that, that he was grieved.

* Please read the language in this whole section as brother and sister; I have struggled with the male bias of the language, but in that it concerns Peter, it is what it is. To develop its application to refer to us all by using the word 'human' rather than brotherly, has of course, other connotations which juxtapose it wrongly as something less than spiritual. I have marked it sometimes ('mankind's inhumanity to mankind') to make the point, but it begins to get horribly clumsy. The Germans have an inclusive word and I regret that we do not.

It's what Cain failed to do for Abel and is perhaps the heart of mankind's inhumanity to mankind. Decision to love (agape) is utterly necessary as the discipline, but brotherhood (phileo) is the incarnational lifestyle that Jesus goes on to describe to Peter: tend my lambs at whatever cost.

There are definite points in the development of revelation and/or character, when something less fully gives place to something greater. After this, the former thing, though valid in its time, is no longer tolerable ('When I was a child..... but ... I put away childish things.') I believe Peter was brought to such a watershed and that today's church faces a similar one. Peter had already been challenged about the worldview his questions about greatness, as in role, position or influence, revealed and was warned that Satan, who seeded and inhabits that worldview, desired to have him. The cock crowed three times to mark that the time was up on such compromise. The challenge to brotherly love was then deliberately arrowed into the space created by the deconstruction of the power-shaped worldview. It was an intensely painful process for Peter but ultimately his salvation.

The third time around

As for Peter, so for us. This particular challenge was issued 'the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.'

We cannot ignore the historical three-fold Holy Spiritual baptism of the world in the last century as the real-time manifestation of God's tangible, resurrectional love, which cost him everything. Three times he has come to his contemporary disciples. Three times we, his disciples in today's globalised world, have experienced and received the gift of his resurrection Spirit, the mark of Jesus' brotherhood, 'the first born among many brothers and sisters'.

This amazing love dynamic is irrevocably, though perhaps unconsciously, through and in the people of God - 'sons of the kingdom'- sown into 'the field'. Seeded into the whole of creation, it challenges every motivation which is lesser.

So the conflict in our societies today is whether law and negotiated power relationships will reassert themselves. Or will they give way to the greater, to the self-denying love dynamic and motivation released as well as incarnated by today's resurrected body of Christ. Will resurrection become for us 'the political act' that N.T. Wright suggests? The brotherly love that does not insist on its own way is given for the 'polis', the multitude; it has political and social application but is antithetical to the exercise of power and kingship. It will challenge the 'world domination systems' and be resisted, but the tools of the powermongers, law and even death, cannot overcome the life that is freely given. The resurrection of a loving new humanity is the final word.

Tearing down our belief systems and thought patterns

According to the longer view I first suggested in 1994 and have since developed (the outline pattern can be seen on the website www.passion.org.uk and 'Facing 2012') I believe 2011 has been the culmination to a four-year season of God's interventions. During this time he has determined to expose the hidden power structures behind the way we believe and therefore act in the western world. They are the 'vain imaginations' or 'speculations' that we are called to destroy by spiritual means (2 Cor 10).

As for Peter, so our contemporary, unconscious belief systems and received thought patterns have had to be unravelled to release the deeper emotional and spiritual responses of our shared humanity. These last years have been, and will continue to be, severely disorientating for many of us. But when various prophets back in the early 90s reported God as saying he wanted his church back, surely he did, because he needed seed for a new harvest of righteousness and of peace to grow up in creation! So he began the process of undoing our unconsciously received, power-based, distorted worldview to release the gift of a people motivated and empowered by the overcoming love dynamic of resurrected personhood!

Cracks in the power structures - reading the signs

At the same time, the hidden organisational power structures will also crack! Having earlier warned of time-up on the western financial system, I further prophesied in Holland in 2008 that as that year had revealed the injustice and unsustainability of the banking system, so by 2011 we would see the structures of the nation state itself beginning to crack.

The banks were instituted - in Holland in sign, in England in fullness - to undergird the nation state and the costs of war. The effect of the church's role, by which I do mean the real people of God, in the nation state and the impact this has had on theological understanding has been the subject of Roger's intensely thorough doctoral research, so we are not speaking lightly or ignorantly when suggesting these things. (His thesis will be published in book form in the New Year; please contact us for copies of 'Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West'). What might have been potentially dismissed by some as slightly 'flaky, prophetic' suggestion has been severely tested both by research and the present fulfilment of the word: the earlier threatened bankruptcy of Iceland, but now Greece and the ongoing, subsequent threat to the Eurozone project. We should soon expect the double dip recession I also foretold, as US and France, and others to follow, lose their AAA credit rating.

I am not thrilled by this economic state of affairs as it affects us all and our families, nor do I at all rejoice in the turmoil on the streets of our cities. I do however believe they are signs of injustice being exposed. Both dependency culture and economic domination alike are effects of a corrupt system, in which we are all implicated, and which God calls Babylon. We surely believe he is committed to ultimately exposing this system as destructive of humanity and the creation, and deserving of judgement. At the same time, we fully rejoice in the fabulous grace of God who walks alongside people even in their wrong choices, as when Israel insisted on being like other nations and having a king. So we recognise that he has also walked and worked within and through the consecutive Western empires to care for people even as he built the process for change.

But the cycles of historical activity in the book of Revelation that climax in the great cry, 'fallen, fallen is Babylon the great... and she has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit ...' must unfold.

Beginning in the house of God

As time fills up, injustices that could have been overlooked or even redeemed in the past become increasingly demonised and can no longer be tolerated. At the same time there has to be hope, so we rejoice that, today, the people of God seeded in society are increasingly trained, disciplined and given prophetic sight as to how things can and must be different for the sake of the poor.

Today is one such fullness of times requiring the exposure and judgement of the hidden structures of our western world. We are living through marvellous days of potential change which nevertheless make a huge demand on 'the perseverance and the faith of the saints'. These days, being so significantly transitional, can only be resourced by a radically disciplined ecclesia: people who have embraced the judgement first because it begins at the house of God. Our own darkened belief systems and default desire for the seats of power and influence, even for the best of motives, have to be dismantled and overtaken by the dynamic self-giving love of God for all of creation and humankind.

DAY SIX: THE CHALLENGE OF THE KINGDOM

So the old mindset revealed by Peter has to be dealt a death blow, which will inevitably be followed by an intense period of learning and unlearning! For the disciples with Peter among them it was a period of 40 days when Jesus appeared to them differently than before and spoke 'of things concerning the kingdom of God.' The symbolism of time of course connotes the wilderness period when the earlier people of God who had

been so patterned by the values of the Egyptian empire were led out of their captivity into a journey in the wilderness (longer than was really needed) to get the captivity of mind out of them!

Word and Spirit

I often refer to Smith Wigglesworth's foresight of a time when 'the Word and the Spirit come together' and many of us wonder what this will look like! Was it not foreshadowed for the disciples in this period of 40 days? This was a time of encountering the Jesus they knew as teacher, as Word, now the 'designated Son of God with power by the resurrection... according to the Spirit'. And he spent this time deliberately teaching them to re-configure their own thinking to match their renewed Spiritual awareness. The same pattern can be seen in Acts 19 when Paul arrives in Ephesus and having led the disciples there through the baptism of John, to Jesus, to receiving the Holy Spirit, then stayed 'reasoning and persuading about the kingdom of God' and 'reasoning daily'. It is my suggestion that we are entering into an intense period of a similar re-configuration of our received understanding, concepts and language, to prepare a people who are more accurately aligned, mind, spirit, heart and head, for the move prophesied.

The ground of the challenge to renewed thinking

In both the storylines, in Jerusalem and Ephesus, it is the understanding of 'the kingdom' that is the ground for the challenge to renewed thinking and for a newly emerging European reformed or resurrected ecclesia, it will be the same ground. Our own understanding and experience of nationhood, sovereignty, law and government is now under the microscope, and, as even pragmatically 'the markets' are demanding change in how these things function, so we must be people who ask very radical questions of Jesus about what he meant by 'the kingdom' and even his very use of the language of kingship, rulership and nationhood.

So, as we enter this period of intense re-orientation of all we have known socially and politically, as indeed the first disciples were experiencing in their time, we will have to face the next, even more challenging narrative that will inform our journey into this new year, in the question: "Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

Rather than approach this question as specific to Israel at this point, let's consider it in the context of today's experience of nationhood and our own narrative, as I recap it:

In these times of such extreme change, God is calling us to walk forwards rather than backwards, learning lessons from Hezekiah!

We are beginning to move from the safety of what we knew and understood to a different walk of faith and love, being led where we did not naturally want to go;

The judgement of Babylon is actually beginning to empty out the deep-structural power of even democratic nation states;

Globalised capital, which is the newest empire, is shifting increasingly to the East and further disempowering the western nation states in particular.

In this context, as we see nation states try, increasingly frantically, to strengthen their legal machinery, watch for the inevitable shift to more and more stringent sentences domestically and posturing internationally, a fresh sudden rise of extreme nationalism and ever stronger interventions of global institutions to determine new trans-national alliances. And pray for new wisdom and strategic direction for how to engage constructively with these shifts around us.

The redemptive purpose of now

The functional structure of the nation state and the laws and religious, socio-cultural rituals undergirding it have been going through many paroxysms - from the genocides of the imposed nation states of Africa, the break up of the USSR, through the Balkan wars, even in microcosm to the devolution of powers in the UK.

Now the very nature of the state (what some have called only a 'theo-political imagination') is being questioned. What used to be simple is now irrevocably complex; the lands, borders, and ethnae can surely never again be disentangled or revert to some supposed original pattern.

How, then, can we afford not to learn from the mistakes the earlier disciples made? Is not such a question about national restoration in a time of such epic change (God himself is standing among them in the middle of time and creation) immensely short-sighted? Doesn't his answer turn them immediately into a different trajectory, out into other, different nations, 'all Judea, Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth'? Are we not, as resurrected humanity, given as the gift of brother and sister to all peoples and lands?

We must therefore ask different questions: what is the redemptive purpose of now? The 'society of discipline' organised around a commonly held worldview is everywhere in the west replaced by 'societies of control'. The media and education are the new priesthood, toiling to persuade everyone of what worldview we all should agree to. This is sometimes called 'secular', sometimes defined as 'tolerant', but now, or soon increasingly, harking back to how things were. Meanwhile the powers of law, war and money effect the coercion and Big Brother is definitely not only on channel 5!

But the people of God must now be alert to every attempt to darken our sight and silence our calling for a different future. Potentially now full of love, passion, wisdom and sight since the third global outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we are being scattered throughout all the earth, all the peoples, all the structures. The seed of the new way of being, the children of the God of Love, is sown and the values of an alternative society should be beginning to grow up among the thorns and thistles of increasingly demonised and failing organisations and social structures.

Dream different dreams

The challenge this year is not how things can be restored to how they were, even re-invested with our interpretation of Christian values. Instead it's how to imagine and live out practical new manifestations of genuinely inclusive community within a crumbling social edifice. We have to struggle with fresh ideas of how as individuals we can engage in brotherly collaboration with those 'different' from us and how to handle the resource of that interaction rightly. The challenge is to love unconditionally, empower good agendas other than our own within multi-cultural communities and experiment with ways in which such groups can align non-competitively and resource each other. We need to explore again how 'to live in peace with all people' and 'to be content' as a vibrant alternative to the clamour for rights and consumption.

The old hegemony is being challenged at every level, from the streets, to the G20 and IMF. I believe this is under the urging of God himself, who came to abolish 'all rule and all authority and power.' (1 Cor. 15:24) What the alternative society looks like, one resourced by a love which may kill the initiator, but never the dissident, is down to us and our ability to embrace chaotic creativity, dream different dreams and see unexpected visions.

Sue Mitchell, August 2011.