

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

15th May 2022

Two of the readings today are about visions; and the other one happens at night, in the dark.

Sometimes I meet someone who's had a vision and wants to talk about it. A vision is a disconcerting experience; sometimes, as with Peter's vision in the Acts reading today, it seems to carry a message. Perhaps sometimes it's a way for your mind to tell you something you know but you're avoiding. So sometimes I meet someone who wants to talk about a vision, and usually I think this is because I'm wearing a clerical collar and they've found me in a church building.

But the first time this happened I wasn't in a church building. I was in a pilgrim hostel in Spain, on the Camino, and I was not wearing a clerical collar. I was wearing nothing whatsoever, because I was having a shower. Pilgrim hostels in Spain, unless things have changed since then, are unisex. Dorms are unisex. And in this hostel even the showers were unisex, but - fortunately - there were separate cubicles. So I was having a shower in one cubicle, and in the next cubicle was this man, and we fell into conversation. As you do. He worked as a builder half the year, and the other half of the year he used to go on pilgrimages. He asked me if I was a Christian and I said yes, I was. This remains the only time, ever, that I have testified to the Christian faith while having a shower. And then he told me about the vision that he had seen.

His vision was of himself, a little ball of stuff, rolled up into a ball held on the palm of a hand, all black. Those were his sins. Or himself. It was the same thing, he said. A little ball of stuff, all rolled up, closed in on itself, all dark. It worried him, that darkness, that closed-in little ball.

The Gospel reading today happens in darkness. The words just before the bit we read are 'And it was night'. And it was night. The words just before that are something Jesus says to Judas. Jesus is having supper with his disciples. What we call the last supper, but at the time, it's just supper - but not just supper either. It seems to be a Passover meal, a festival meal; and by this time, because of the things Jesus is saying, it also seems to have a particularly charged atmosphere.

Now Jesus is saying something, aside, to Judas: Do quickly what you are going to do. He gives him a piece of bread as a signal. And Judas seems to know what it means, although the others don't know. Judas goes out. And it was night. And the words seem to make the story change gear. Now we are heading into the dark.

In the other readings, the ones about visions, it's not dark. The reading from Revelation is a vision of the holy city, the home of God. In that city there is no night, John learns in the vision - it's just a bit later on - and there are no lights in the city, there's no sun and no moon, because the whole city is lit by God. Illuminated. Suffused with light.

The other vision, in the other reading, is what Peter sees. He doesn't say anything about whether it was night or day in the vision. He has enough to describe with all the things he saw. There was something like a sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by the four corners of the sheet, and in the sheet, all together, there are all the different kinds of animals. And there's a voice, telling Peter that he could eat all of them. And Peter says no, he observes the food rules, he doesn't eat food that Jewish people don't eat. But the voice keeps inviting him to eat. So it may be daylight or darkness, but either way it's a vision of openness. Everything is open to Peter; contrary to what he used to think.

Night, and Judas going out into the darkness to tell the authorities where they can catch Jesus and arrest him. And visions of light and openness and invitation and redemption. Clearly, something has happened in between.

This is the Fifth Sunday of Easter, which is a clue to what it is that has happened to make the difference. Easter has happened. But all the same - there are wars, and hardship, and barriers, and betrayals, all around us, all the time. 'And it was night,' says the Gospel. If it isn't still night, most of the time it feels very like it. Maybe then all we can do is curl up, curl in on ourselves, roll up into a little ball in the dark. We are back with the vision I heard about in the shower.

That reminded me, and it may remind you, of another vision, a famous vision of Julian of Norwich. She saw a little ball, about the size of a hazelnut. What is it? she asked in the vision. And she was told, This is everything that is made. The world. The entire universe. How can it last, being so little? she asked. Because God loves it, she was told.

So - back in the shower - I told the builder/pilgrim about Julian of Norwich and the hazelnut. And he liked that, and went off to think about it, to see if it gave him a different way of thinking about his vision of the little closed-in ball of darkness that he thought was himself. I don't know if it did. I don't know what happened to him.

Think of Jesus with the disciples, there in the dark, with betrayal in the street outside. Think of them as if they're inside that little rolled-up ball, inside Julian's hazelnut. It's everything that is made. It's tiny; it's fragile, it's precarious. But it's held in God's hand.

Inside, in the dark, with the disciples, Jesus tells them something. He says it's new. It's not new, when you come to think about it, but that would be a whole other sermon. What he says is 'love one another'. Outside, cut off from them just now because the world has closed in on them, outside is light and openness and the freedom of the children of God. But inside, in the dark, Jesus says 'love one another': do that, and you are in me, and I am in God, and we are in the glory, the light of God, here in the dark. Outside, the light of God holding all that is made. Inside, at the darkest, trapped in this rolled-up little world where everything has turned on him, inside is God in Jesus, opening up the love of God to us.

Maybe it is new, after all. It is Easter. It is resurrection. It starts there in the dark.

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