



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*26th April 2020
3rd Sunday of Easter*

Reflection

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One of the things about the continuing lockdown is that it is triggering quite a lot of memory. There is something about being confined at home for a long period that makes us reflect on the past, in the course of which memories, both good and bad, begin to surface. As we look back through our lives it is not unusual to feel regret at things we have done or not done, or experienced. Such memories are currently set against a background of scarcity, so it is understandable if our thoughts move in the direction of loss.

What do we do with difficult memories? One thing we can do is use them as a form of inoculation against errors of the past. Albert Camus's 1947 novel *La Peste* (The Plague) about an outbreak of plague, which could hardly be more relevant to the times we are living in, has often been read as an allegorical treatment of how different types of individual responded to the occupation of France during the Second World War. The novel ends with a warning that plague will always return, so we must remain vigilant. It is to be hoped that one consequence of the recent centenary commemorations of the First World War will have been to sensitise a new generation to the horrors of global conflict, helping to ensure that it never happens again. The centenary of the 1918 influenza pandemic was not similarly marked. A world in which antibiotics and vaccines had been in plentiful supply for fifty years was apparently not interested in the memory of a respiratory disease that had triggered an

extreme immune response in some sufferers, causing millions of deaths worldwide. Perhaps the next generation may be better at learning than ours.

What to do with difficult memories is a prominent feature of the resurrection narratives. The most poignant of these is the account in John's Gospel of Jesus meeting Peter and the other disciples early one day on the shores of Lake Galilee. They have gone back to fishing, almost as if the ministry of Jesus had never happened, and they have worked all night without a catch. A stranger on the shore suggests they put down the nets on the other side of the boat, and they make an enormous catch of fish, at which point they realise that the stranger is the risen Christ. Scarcity has become abundance, just like the first time they met him. The memory of Jesus returns, and it is no longer as if their years spent with him had never been. He invites them to share breakfast, offering them bread and fish (just like when five thousand were fed), cooking on a charcoal fire (just like in the courtyard of the High Priest's house).

For Peter, the sight of Christ standing beside the charcoal fire must have been a moment of deep shame, the memory of his threefold betrayal burning inside him. Yet Jesus asks him three times: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' And his answer in the affirmative, three times, turns Simon back into Peter, the rock on which the new community of followers will be built. Peter must go forward with the knowledge of his betrayal, yet also the knowledge that it has been redeemed. It is from that assurance of the redemption of failure that the disciples are sent out into the world to make other disciples, a promise on which they make good. The difficult memories are faced in the presence of the risen Christ, where they are transformed and healed. The same can be true for us.

What might we do with our difficult memories? One fruit that we can bear is to offer the hand of reconciliation to those we have wronged, however trivially or seriously, and ask for forgiveness. And to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us, however trivially or seriously. We could use these weeks of confinement to try to heal relationships that have been broken. The risen Christ transformed the experience of his disciples by offering forgiveness and a new start, at the very point when they thought all was lost. Is there anywhere in our lives we could do the same?

The story in our Gospel reading today, of the two disciples meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, is another occasion when his followers do not recognise him after the resurrection. He turns out to have been the stranger on the shore, the stranger on the road, the stranger in the garden. Why the lack of recognition? The risen Jesus is not only freed of the boundaries of time and space: he is freed, too, of the narrowness of people's expectations of him. Cleopas and his companion are told they have too narrow an understanding of messiahship. Jesus is not what they thought him to be, and they must learn afresh who he is. And yet it is when he breaks bread that they recognise him. Just like at the Last Supper. The risen Jesus is both strange and deeply familiar. Their minds having been instructed on the road, now their hearts beat with renewed energy and they race back to Jerusalem to find they are not alone, for others have encountered the risen Christ too.

This time of pandemic is teaching us that we have to learn from our memories but also start again, rediscover things and be ready to learn afresh. The risen Christ always calls us forward to new encounter, fullness of life. We are constantly challenged by this figure 'going before' us. We must allow ourselves to be energised by the freshness of the challenge, trust in its unpredictability, yet sustained too by the memory, handed to us across the centuries, of the one who turns scarcity into abundance, calling us by name. Calling us to compassion for others, to love them as he loved us. Calling us on, as Rowan Williams puts it, to 'the hope of a transformed future in which human relations will be fully what they can and should be'.

As we saw on the lakeshore, in the resurrection stories forgiveness is a precursor to sending out. The wounds of Christ are still visible in his hands and his side, yet he breathes forgiveness on the friends who have let him down. Knowing how crucial forgiveness is to fullness of life as humans, it is what Jesus commissions his followers to offer to the world: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.' (John 20.23). Those who have received forgiveness become a source of reconciliation.

What do we do with difficult memories? I would like to share with you one fragment I first heard of twenty-five years ago and which I have never forgotten, for it shows to a quite extraordinary degree how difficult memory can be transformed. Today, across France, churches that belong to the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France are saying prayers to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day, which fell this week. The fragment of memory I want to share with you is of some words that were found in 1945, written on a piece of wrapping paper near the body of a dead child in the Ravensbruck concentration camp. In words reminiscent of the cry of forgiveness uttered by Jesus from the desolation of the cross, they tell of the power of the human spirit, made in the image of God, to find transformation and hope beyond suffering, possibility in place of despair, new life beyond unspeakable tragedy. They are words for our time, and for all time.

The words on the wrapping paper said this:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will,
but also those of ill will.

But do not remember all the suffering they inflicted on us.

Remember the fruits we bought, thanks to this suffering:

our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,
the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart
which has grown out of this;

and, when they come to judgment,
let all the fruits that we have borne
be their forgiveness.

Amen.