

# THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

## A REFLECTION

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I AM approaching this vast Mystery by asking two questions: what was Jesus doing and what was God doing? In looking at the role of Jesus, I will show that the Paschal Mystery actually gives birth to various Christologies. Without the climax of Easter, Jesus would not have been designated 'the Christ' with the full meaning of 'Son of God in power' (Rom. 1:4). This climactic moment is the historical consequence of the choices he made throughout his life. In expanding the question to explore what God was doing, I raise the salvific implications of this Mystery — what type of God is revealed, how does this God act with respect to human life and the universe? What can it mean to say 'Christ died for our sins' (Rom. 5:6-8).

In pondering these questions I have been greatly influenced by the writing of Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (New York, Seabury Press, 1980), and Tony Kelly's lecture notes on *Christ the Redeemer* at Yarra Theological Union. Their influence goes beyond what can be acknowledged in specific references, for their style of enquiry encouraged me to explore my own experience of the Paschal Mystery and attempt to articulate my 'faith seeking understanding'.

### *What was Jesus doing?*

Jesus was living out the consequences of choices he made — choices dramatised in the encounter with Satan immediately after his Baptism (Lk. 4:1-13) — choices to stake his life and its ultimate meaning on God alone. Jesus experienced a new inbreaking of God into the world. His experience took him out of the confines of family and culture and into a series of totally new relationships. He was born a Jew of the Davidic House, bound in solemn covenant with Yahweh. The power of an indwelling

Spirit opened his heart beyond the confines of Torah and into a loving intimacy with Abba, Father (Kelly, para.172).

This intimacy was already empowering his life when he took up the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah to proclaim 'the Lord's year of favour' (Lk. 4:19). His proclamation of the Good News in Nazareth was rejected and he faced the hostility of his own people for the first time (Lk. 4:29). He chose to continue.

He spoke of, lived out and shared the reality of a loving Father. The immediacy of love he communicated threatened the mediated religion of his people. In place of Covenant, Torah and Temple, Jesus invited men and women into a new Way, Truth and Life to be found in him (Jn 14:6). To protect their religious heritage the High Priest and the Sanhedrin decided 'It is better for one man to die for the nation' (Jn 11:50). In order that he be killed and totally discredited, the religious leaders handed him over to Roman authorities thus ensuring the curse of a death 'hanging on a tree' (Dt. 21:23).

In spite of opposition from his closest followers, Jesus continued to choose; 'We are going up to Jerusalem' (Mk 10:33). In the face of immense human anguish and the apparent meaninglessness of his life, he chose: 'Not my will but thine be done' (Mk 14:36). Even in the utter absence of God, he chose: 'Into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk. 23:46). Jesus, on Good Friday, remained faithful to the love that permeated his life. He entrusted himself into the loving embrace of a Father even when it seemed that love was impotent, that he had failed his Father's mission and that the powers of evil were victorious. Jesus abandoned himself into the emptiness of death, into the silent tomb of Holy Saturday.

*Holy Saturday.*

*Who or what power sanctifies this day?*

Holy Saturday, perhaps more than Pentecost, is the day of the Spirit, the brooding Sanctifier who is able to draw forth life from primeval chaos. And this is what Good Friday has brought about — an emptiness in time and space. God is dead to the world and historical time ceases to be. This is given symbolic expression in the Gospels when Jesus dies — there is darkness, the earth quakes, the dead rise, the End-Time has arrived (Mt. 27:45-53). There are no written records of Saturday. Life stopped. Good Friday does not evolve into Sunday. There is a void in between. Jesus is dead. The Word is silenced and the Father has no other Word to speak. For one moment in time God is mute. Before the Word can be uttered anew, the Spirit hovers over the darkness.

Jesus' surrender in love to death is met by a Father's embrace of love to life. The enfleshed intimacy of Father and Son is released by death to be a power for all creation. The image that speaks into this mysterious day of silence is found in a parable of a boy who grasped his inheritance then left home, even departed from the land of God's blessing and went into a foreign country (Lk. 15:11-32). There, he squandered his inheritance of money, culture and identity. He lived the antithesis of his former self, not just feeding pigs but taking on their unclean nature and sharing their food. At this point of utter desolation and lost identity he knew himself not worthy to be son.

In death, Jesus also loses sight of his identity as Son. The dynamism of his life is lost in the desolate cry 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' (Mt. 27:45). His mission, his life has failed. Like to us in all things but sin, Jesus too would know what it is to say 'Father I am not worthy to be called your son' (Lk. 15:19). This unworthiness is not guilt but the existential poverty of humanity in the face of absolute Love. Love sears. In the experience of love I know my own poverty, my nothingness before the Beloved.

Love reveals itself firstly as grace, as gift to be simply received. In death Jesus comes before the Father with nothing. In that dark, still day, Jesus encounters a gracious Father saying: 'All I am is yours' (Jn. 17:10). The first gifted moment of easter is surely this re-statement of identity, 'You are my Son, the Beloved'. This is the



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Father's first Word of a new creation. In the empty void of this day, the Spirit has been active, the Spirit that enables the cry of recognition — 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). This intimate moment of love is shared only by Father, Son and Spirit. No one else witnesses this Resurrection moment when the Son is reborn in the Spirit, to live on as the Father's gracious Word of love.

*The Disciples' Experience*

Jesus, risen from death, begins anew to light the flame of hope in the hearts of disciples who had given up. And this takes time. Luke's 'forty days', reflect the human experience of learning to trust yet again, to overcome despair and forge new bonds of love. Well might Jesus ask after the days of his death and rising, 'Do you love me?' (Jn. 21:15). In this Resurrection time, he reaffirms his experience of a loving Father and re-enacts the reality of the Kingdom. The meals with the Crucified and Risen One are invitations to re-enter the dynamism of the Kingdom. But even up to his enigmatic Ascension, 'some still doubted' (Mt. 28:17).

The disciples need more than Jesus' words and the witness of His Resurrection. The dynamism of the Kingdom is the Spirit (Kelly, para.194ff). Only when they too experience a re-creation are they able to enter into the meaning of the Paschal Mystery. The intimacy of Father and Son is no longer concentrated in the historical person of Jesus. This love is now a power released for all. Pentecost is the implosion of the Spirit into the hearts of the believers (Rom. 5:5). At Pentecost the Resurrection of the Son explodes as a power of life for the whole of creation.

In Pentecost time, Christology is born. Jesus of Nazareth is proclaimed as the 'Messiah', the Christ (Acts 2:36). This proclamation goes beyond the narrowness of Jewish Messianic

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## THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

expectations. All humanity is caught up in a new creation, not only human life but the cosmos itself is part of this new birth (Rom. 8:22). Pauline Christology uses new images to ensure that Jesus, as the Christ, is not limited to past concepts. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation' (Col. 1:15), — 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). Whatever Peter meant by his profession 'You are the Christ' (Mk. 8:29) when speaking of Jesus, this pales before the universal, cosmic Christology of the post Paschal Mystery community. In the light of Easter the human story of Jesus is seen in richer and broader horizons. Words about Jesus the Christ develop into words about God 'reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). This leads into the second question — what was God doing in the Paschal Mystery?

### *What was God doing?*

Through the incarnate Word, God was present on Calvary as participant and not as a Divine spectator. What can this mean? In broadening the perspective, I am placing the execution of Jesus within a wider, universal drama.

As Jesus was living out the consequences of his choices, God was living out the consequences of Being-in-Love (1 Jn. 3:14). Being-in-Love brought forth creation and entered into history firstly through the events of one people and then in the historical life of one person. The timeless, creative Word became flesh and entered into time that we might see the fulness of Divine Love. When we see Jesus, we see God. In the compassion and companionship of Jesus we meet God in love with us; God

inviting us to believe this and to live within this dynamism. This dynamic intimacy is life in the Kingdom where all the powers that cripple life are overcome (Kelly, para.154).

On Calvary, Being-in-Love was put to the test. The life of Jesus was too good to be believed. The God he revealed was beyond comprehension. Even those drawn into his circle of friendship struggled to accept his words and wanted to establish clear limits where Jesus showed unlimited love. 'How many times must I forgive?' (Mt. 18:21) The invitation to participate in love was finally rejected. Calvary was humanity's resounding 'No'!

Where does this 'No' come from? What is it in our human experience that is given voice in this refusal to love? I believe this power of 'No' is rooted in a fear that distorts our perceptions and paralyses our ability to trust. Fear traps us into seeking some means of control, some way of climbing out of the abyss of terror. The greatest, all pervading anxiety is the fear of non-existence, of meaningless death. We fear our human contingency and struggle against it, or as Becker states 'we drink, drug or shop ourselves out of awareness' *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973, p.284). We exert ourselves against our environment, in a futile attempt to escape this meaningless, to grasp and control life and to assert 'I AM'.

In the history of revelation, God is shown to be gracious love, eternally giving life to all who would receive it. But it is a gift! We can lay no claim to this love. We do not deserve it and can do nothing to earn it. Before such utterly gracious love I experience the full reality of my

## DETACHMENT

**A**T one point in Luke Jesus condemns those who refuse to grieve in this world, despite all that he has done to call them to this: 'we sang dirges, and you wouldn't cry' (Lk 7:32). We cannot be authentic Christians, if we refuse constantly to grieve over our sinful attachments to what does not belong to Christ.

Christ's life, especially in his agony, death, and resurrection, is a journey of grieving, in which he is that which is lost and the leader of the mourning ritual at the same time. Detachment, which is the letting go of all that would hinder individuals or organisations from a committed relationship with God, is at the heart of all authentic grieving. Jesus is *the* model of detachment, for 'he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . accepting death, death on a cross' (Ph 2:7,8), in order that we might share the new fruits of his victory over death through his resurrection: 'In all truth I tell you, you will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy' (Jn 16:20).

Gerald A. Arbuckle, S.M., *Grieving for Change* (St Pauls, 1991)

human poverty and contingency. Can I trust this love — this gift which is beyond my control? Can I dare hope that it will not be withdrawn? Would I rather trust lesser gods that do fall within my control? This was the choice that confronted the people who met Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders chose a God they could manage. They had a secure system of holiness, they knew the requirements and rituals that bound God to them. Being-in-Love, revealed in Jesus, broke the controls of their system. Jesus asked too much trust.

On Calvary, this conflict between Being-in-Love and humanity caught in the paralysis of fear and despair, reached its climax. Being-in-Love is utterly transparent in the person of Jesus. He showed Love to the end. He even saw through the religious/political motives of his executioners and could pray for forgiveness 'for they know not what they do' (Lk. 23:34). Jesus does not give in to hate or despair. He is active love even in his final moment as he delivers up the Spirit, and in his death the waters of a new creation are released (Jn. 19:34).

#### *Into the Heart of Human Despair*

When the human participants retire from Calvary to keep holy the Sabbath, while the body of Jesus lies in the darkness of a tomb, God's active love continues. Although declared a day of rest, it was obvious from the human experience of birth and death, that God continued to work in these processes (Jn. 5:17).

John's Gospel provides some hints about this work. Following his introductory chapters, Jesus' mission evolves around four major human needs. Human paralysis that desires healing (chapter 5), human emptiness that hungers for life (chapter 6), human blindness that longs for sight (chapter 9) and human death that yearns for life (chapter 11). In John's Gospel Jesus is always the agent of the Father, acting on His behalf (5:19, 6:32, 10:37). Jesus' death takes the action of God beyond the grave and into the heart of despair. On Calvary, in the face of ultimate Love, humanity's ultimate fear to trust was starkly revealed. The Spirit of Jesus, the waters from a broken heart, are John's symbols that the darkness of Calvary is the birth of a new creation. Being-in-Love is not paralysed by fear and death.

On the first day of this new creative activity, Jesus rises into darkness. Jesus met Mary while it was dark. He went to the disciples in the

evening. These moments are more than natural darkness. In John, darkness is symbolic of all those forces that are opposed to life and light (Jn. 1:1). Jesus rises from within the darkness of humanity's fear and despair and the dispels them. Where John uses symbols, Luke narrates a story (Lk. 21). In meeting the disciples The Risen Lord breathes into them the Spirit and speaks the word 'Peace'. The first act in the community is to cast out fear and give peace. Death, fear, despair have no more power. Being-in-Love has been shown to have greater potency. Being-in-Love is now a power released into human hearts as gift in a new creation.

The immediate experience of the Spirit takes the Paschal Mystery out of a fixed, defined moment in time and expands the meaning of this event into eternal time. The spontaneous explanation of the Resurrection was in terms of the arrival of the End Time (in Greek — the 'eschaton'). This was the only concept these Jewish believers had that could explain the Risen presence of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit that they experienced. With the delay of this 'End Time' further Christologies developed — 'the pre-existent Word' (John), 'the expiatory sacrifice' (Hebrews), 'the Body of Christ' (1 Corinthians), 'the Wisdom of God' (Matthew), 'the new Moses' (Matthew and John). All time, all people, all matter is now seen as 'charged with the grandeur of God'. Jesus, born in time, rises as the Christ of all time, past, present and to come.

The Paschal Mystery reveals to me the utterly loving power of God, given in a particular time and place, but now, through the Spirit, accessible to all people of all time. This Mystery reveals a God with power to save me from those fears that prevent my living life to the full. Not only humanity, but creation also shares this plenitude of life as a gift of the Risen Jesus (Jn. 21:4-14). The Paschal Mystery is now a living power that can and does transform my human experience. There are times when I am trapped by numbing forces that can withdraw me from life. At these times only the power of the inspired Word can break through my paralysis and enable me to choose life. This is my experience. This is my living witness that He is Risen. Being-in—Love is still saying 'Yes' to humanity's cries and there is now a gracious power in the universe enabling my 'Yes' to this invitation to love (2 Cor. 1:19).

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