

Being saved and being wrong

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“Are you saved?” The question is infuriating because you are expected to answer yes or no. And a good number of Catholics somehow feel that they cannot answer yes or no, which hesitation is, for their questioner, a sure sign that the answer is no. The problem is that, when we find the question of salvation reduced to one to which we might answer simply yes or no, it becomes difficult for Catholics to talk of salvation at all. This is a great pity, because the Catholic faith has a very rich appreciation of salvation, one in which the notion of salvation wrought by Jesus is intrinsically linked to belonging to the Church (without being coterminous with it), and it would be no bad thing if we could recover an unashamed way of being able to talk about this.

The trouble with the question is that it asks us to declare our story finished. If we answer “yes, I am saved”, then there is no ‘rest of the story’. And that means that our lives, after we have pronounced ourselves ‘saved’, are like a play whose denouement comes in Act One, leaving the remaining acts hanging spare. It is worse, of course, because it means that we have no plot line to follow, creatively to unravel with patience and difficulty (or with fear and trembling), for the rest of our lives.

What I would like to suggest is that the Resurrection of Jesus does give us a story to work out, a way of creatively forging who we are to become, but it is, by its very nature, an open-ended story whose end we cannot, and should not try to, grasp.

Deficient understanding

Shortly before his Passion, Jesus has a discussion with some Sadducees about the resurrection (in which they did not believe). They put to him a question about seven brothers dying in turn, passing on to each other, in compliance with Levirate law, the wife of the first brother to die, as if she were a used car. Whose wife will she be at the resurrection? The question is cleverer than it seems, because the Sadducees based their understanding of God on the first five books of the Bible alone, understanding Moses to have written these. Now, if there were a resurrection, then surely God would have told Moses about it since Moses was God’s friend, but Moses says nothing about it. Not only did he say nothing about it, but he promulgated the Levirate law. This law was designed to permit the brothers to produce offspring for a brother who had died without siring a child, a piece of considerate thinking which makes sense only if the sole continuity possible for a mortal were the continuity embodied in having produced descendants.

Jesus’ reply completely side-steps the question: “Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?” Then at the end he repeats solemnly “You are greatly wrong.” Jesus takes a text from the Pentateuch to show that God is completely alive, utterly without any shading by death, which means that those who are alive in God, even when they are apparently dead (as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were at the time of Moses), are able to be kept in life by God. Furthermore, the utter creative effervescence of God does not need human reproduction to keep humans alive, for God is able to produce wonderfully diverse humans just as he does angels, each one a different genus, which do not reproduce each other.

Jesus' answer suggests that the real reason why the Sadducees are greatly wrong is in their deficient understanding of God. Their "being wrong" is exactly related to their deficient grasp of the vivacity and deathless effervescence of God.

Now, we can imagine Jesus' disciples being thrilled by Jesus' victory over the Sadducees. After all, their champion was scoring a victory against a redoubtable group of authorities. However, it would be a pity if we left the matter there, because that would be to reduce 'being right about God' to a partisan matter, resolved in an *ad hominem* argument. The point of Jesus' answer is that not only the Sadducees but all of us are greatly wrong, because we all have a deficient grasp of God's effervescent vivacity. All of us are marked by a vision of God that is too bound in by the circumstances, shot through with death, of human life on earth.

Jesus' exchange with the Sadducees came shortly before his Passion and, coming as it does in all three synoptic Gospels, is an important piece of evidence for how Jesus perceived God before his death. Jesus perceived God as utterly without death, completely free from being involved in the death-bound structures of human life. John's Gospel, particularly in chapters 14-17, shows how the central purpose behind what Jesus came to do was precisely to *create a faith* in the deathless and purely loving nature of God. The only way to create such a faith, to create the possibility that others may have a perception of God that is utterly unmarked by death, was to stage-manage his own being put to death by violent men, a creative act that was only possible because Jesus himself knew that God's vivacity and love are unshaded by death, and thus that death for one whom God loves is something that is not final. Jesus could give himself up to death without in any way being moved by death, without any flight from death, or any masochistic desire for self-martyrdom. John shows this by using the term 'I am going to my Father' as a synonym for 'I am going to my death'.

A new way of being human

It needed to be possible that other people, besides Jesus himself, could come to the same perception and understanding of God as he. In this way alone could a new way of being human start to be created, a way of being human whereby mortals are empowered to live without, and beyond, the fear of death, and are thus freed to act creatively and justly. For this purpose Jesus prepared a group of witnesses to follow what he was bringing into being, who might come to understand the complete non-involvement of God in human death and violence, and who might thus start to create the beginnings of a human counter-culture unmarked by death.

Of course, this meant choosing people who, like us, do have an imagination shaded into futility by death, who are frightened into injustice when to act justly means to run the risk of being killed. It meant working very slowly with people like us who did not really understand what Jesus' project was about: how can death-ridden mortals grasp or follow a project whose governing principle is the non-decisiveness of human death? The disciples, who rejoiced at Jesus' victory over the Sadducees, were scarcely less deficient than these in their grasp of God's loving vivacity.

Jesus knew this very well, which is why he knew that it would be only after his death, with his return at the Resurrection and his giving of the Spirit, that the imagination of the disciples would be opened up so that they could see what he had really been about

all along. In the degree to which their imaginations were opened up, they could begin to create a flexible imitation of his self-giving, themselves unhindered by the structuring scandal of death.

Huge cultural shift

It is in this context that we can begin to understand what it is that we celebrate when we celebrate the Resurrection. Jesus' coming back to his disciples was the beginning of the huge cultural shift that brought into being an entirely new perception of who God is and, simultaneously, an entirely new perception of who we humans are. The apostolic witnesses began to be able to perceive that God has nothing at all to do with human violence, or the human social order that is based on human violence. Rather, God is so entirely outside that order that he is able to subvert it from within, by taking a typical human act of violence, a lynch-death, a coming together of all against one who is considered especially guilty and troublesome, and making this into the showing, the revelation of who God really is. He is not the structuring principle of human order, the prince of this world, but the purely benevolent creator of a way out of the order of this world, the self-giving victim who forgives the persecutors, permitting the construction of a non-victimary sociality. God's goodness is shown, not in his accepting a particular human sacrifice to blot out our violence, but rather in his subversion from within of the whole of our mendacious sacrificial order by himself giving us a sacrifice, so that we need never construct our order sacrificially again.

Simultaneously with this perception of God, there came into being a wholly new, and frighteningly drastic, perception of who we human beings are. We are the sort of animals whose whole construction of human social order is founded on a death-distorted desire for security at the expense of victims. This has been called by the Church 'original sin'. If we tend to associate this doctrine exclusively with the story of Adam and Eve, then we are not faithful to the apostolic witnesses. They began to understand the sort of human beings that confuse the deathless-ness of God with the deathful-ness of man, and so involve God in our violence, in terms not only of Adam, but also of Cain, and of Babel. Paul tells us about Adam's desire distorted towards death; John shows that in our failure to perceive who God is, we are heirs of Cain, whose envious desire, moved by the father of lies who was a murderer from the beginning, led him to kill his brother, and thus found what Augustine calls "the earthly city". Luke shows us the coming into being of the new universal human culture at Pentecost as the overcoming of Babel, and thus of the jealous human need to shore up human identity over against the other, that forever leads to separation and violent fissiparousness.

Original sin

However, this perception of who humans really are did not come into being as a sort of divine accusation of humans, so as to make us feel guilty. Quite the reverse. This perception of who humans are comes into being exactly as it becomes possible to leave this state, this condition, and start to become a quite different sort of human being, one not moved by death and its social dynamics. Jesus' Resurrection was not an accusation, but the presence of a creative human forgiveness, making it possible to leave behind a way of being human that can only be understood on our way out of it. The doctrine of original sin is a pa/ting glance at the unnecessary nature of what we are ceasing to be.

Far from being some rather weird sort of ecclesiastical conundrum, the doctrine of original sin is a perception of the universal human involvement in the reign of death, a perception that is strictly dependent on the Resurrection of Jesus. It is, I would suggest, a vital instrument if we are to begin to understand what is meant by the salvation brought us by Jesus, and this because it is the doctrine that we are all, just like the Sadducees, greatly wrong, because we are all formed from within, having our imagination and perception formed by the violent structures that flow from the need to maintain security by death. But it is also the doctrine that we need not be like this. This brings us back to the sort of story we might tell about being saved. Before Jesus, the self-giving victim, was raised up from the dead, there were apparently many stories that one could forge and elaborate over a lifetime, stories in which the key element is how one is related to other people. One could tell stories of triumph over enemies, of the absurdity and inhumanity of foreigners, as well as of the humanity of the local group. All these stories have an end, and the end is death. It is not just that these stories have an end, but the sort of story each one is (of heroes or victims) is structured by death – either giving it out so as to hold on to life, or being destroyed by someone else so that they may hold on to life.

When we talk about being saved, we are not talking about a story of this sort that has an end. We are talking about something really quite unimaginable, a story without an end. This is what Jesus' Resurrection began to make possible: the construction of real human stories, fired and nurtured by an imagination fixed on the deathlessness and vivacity of God, that are able creatively to undo the monotonous human story structured by grasping desire and murderous exclusion. This means that in the case of all of us what we are given is a process by which we come to recognise our complicity in the old story, we come to detect just how like a scratched LP we have sounded, and we begin to forge a story in creative imitation of Jesus' story.

However, the whole point of this new story is that it is not given us as completed, it is given us as something to be created. And we are not left entirely bereft of helpful signs, hints, rules of grammar: it is these things which we call the Church. When Jesus said "Do this in memory of me" he was not only instituting the Eucharist (as in the synoptic Gospels) but he was bringing into being a flexible paradigm of creative action: the commandment "that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you" is in its essence the same commandment as "Do this in memory of me", and it means: allow your creative imaginations to be nurtured by the example I am giving you, which opens up a belief in the utter vivacity of God in such a way that you will be able to do what I am doing. That is, you will be able to create a story of the subversion from within of the way that this world builds its unity, by seeking out and siding with those the world casts out, and allowing yourselves to become, if necessary, the self-giving sacrificial victim of this order. This you will be able to do because, unlike the thinkers of this age, you will understand that there is no necessity behind this order, and so you will be able to create gratuitously in the face of death.

Subversion

The story we are given, the story of salvation, the story which has no end, is in fact a huge multiplicity of stories. All of them start in the same way, by the subversion from

within of the tedious story of the way in which this world shores up its security and peace at the expense of victims. The beginning is for all of us the story of a recognition of complicity in 'being wrong', a recognition of similarity with the other, and then moving off, in how many different ways, to the construction of the wedding banquet of the Lamb. It is a wedding banquet, which means that all of us, good and bad, are invited just as we are, as Matthew indicates. It is important that we realise that what we are gratuitously invited to is a wedding banquet. We should thus happily accept the free wedding garment, rather than being worried about whether we are worthy or not, which means that we are thinking in terms of being called to a judgement by someone who does not like us, rather than to a feast by someone who does. The man at the feast who was thrown out was simply living out his own self-preoccupation about what sort of occasion it was that he had been invited to: struck dumb by his own scandal at himself.

However, it is the wedding banquet of the Lamb. This means that the central story-line which we are all called to tell in a myriad different ways is the story of how we ceased to be the violent sacrificers of the Lamb, and started instead to build small, scarcely visible or significant, signs of the life of the Lamb: hints of God's care and love for all those who are being cast out, who are on their way out of being, who are worth nothing at all in the eyes of the world. We are really only free to take the risk to give ourselves to this enterprise of the building of a deathless story if we are, in the first place, sufficiently free of self-preoccupation about whether we are good or bad, because we hope in the gratuitous generosity of someone who is concerned not about what we might have done, but about what we may become empowered to do. Secondly, we are only set free to start to love what the vanity of the world (which appears as good sense, prudence, firm arguments) regards as of no consequence if we do not mind ourselves becoming as precarious and vulnerable as those whom we learn to serve and love.

Are you saved? The only real answer to the question is not to answer, not to pre-empt the richness of the final judgement, when the astounding diversity of the wedding banquet of the Lamb will be seen, and we may even be surprised at detecting something of our hand in some of the minor decorations. It is rather to allow oneself to be sucked into that strange, dislocated story which starts with the realisation of being wrong, and patiently makes use of the stories, signs, examples, to nourish a creative imagination. It is this story, the story of how we became active participants in the subversion of the monotonous story of this world, that was opened up by Jesus' death and Resurrection. This story is what we called the Church, and it is why salvation is intrinsically linked to the Church with its texts and sacraments. It is a dizzy story, to whose coat-tails we cling with a certain lightness of heart, because we have so little idea of what it might mean creatively to forge a story that has no end.

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