

Resurrection resonances

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Acts 9:1-20; Ps 30; Rev 5:6-14; Jn 21:1-19

Anzac Day is perhaps the one national holiday that stands much of a chance of evoking some kind of emotional response in Australians, apart that is from general gratitude for the chance of another holiday ! (smile). This is perhaps because Anzac Day provides an opportunity for telling stories, performing rituals and generally investing what we think is our past, with our own meanings.

For Christians, of course, the Easter Season is also in its own more profound way, a strange time of remembrances and recollection. We probably tend to emphasise the celebratory bits because of the Resurrection's victory over darkness. But we are actually three weeks into a journey from the empty tomb of Easter Sunday towards the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We are following the disciples in some unexpected, and often at first unrecognised, encounters with the risen Lord. Encounters in which we learn we need to change the way we see things.

In our first reading today Saul found himself blinded on the Damascus Road and lost his external vision for three days. At the end 'something like' scales fell from his eyes. Going into darkness for three days and coming back into the world the same, yet different? Even in its basic outline there is a particularly loud and obvious echo of the Easter story.

The details have many more resonances. Remember, it starts with Saul falling to the ground after a light has flashed around him, and Saul hearing a voice. The voice does not *tell* him what he must do, but rather asks him a *question* — "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?". That double mention of Saul's name, along with the "you", and "me" underlines how much it is a personal call to enter into relationship. It's a call Saul can either accept, or (maybe) reject. But Saul can't avoid a personal response. And of course by saying why are you persecuting *me*, Jesus has also totally identified himself with his followers, like Ananias.

And Jesus' question *does* get a response from Saul — it's a counter-question : "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus' question has gently drawn from Saul himself an important key to his own redemption because the evidence from Paul's later letters suggests that he spent a great deal of the rest of his life trying to answer the question he (Paul) himself had put to Jesus.

During those three days of personal darkness — spent in the rooms of someone called Judas on a street in Damascus called 'Straight' — one wonders what particular kind of hell this Saul of Tarsus must have descended into. Saul, the self-righteous judge and avenger, who has just had his entire world view coming crashing down around him. The same Saul, who even many years later, still felt the hot sting of shame at his past persecutions and who described himself as one 'untimely born'. And perhaps he also continued to hear Jesus' question ringing in his ears — WHY are you persecuting me? Why indeed had Saul been feeding the judgemental, and possibly sadistic, side of his nature by persecuting Christians? Why do any of us do any of the things we do? Do we really know why? These why questions are often the hardest.

Next, we might notice that Saul doesn't regain his sight by having it simply zapped back in the way that he lost it. No, it had to come through ministry of another person. While the focus of this story understandably tends to be on Saul, Ananias' story is also interesting in its own right for many reasons. But perhaps on Anzac Day the aspect that jumps out most vividly is Ananias' extraordinary, maybe even foolhardy courage. His fear at having to confront the dreaded Saul of Tarsus — the great Pharisee Inquisitor — is almost palpable. Yet Ananias is

no fool. “Here am I, Lord” — those were Isaiah’s words when he was called in the temple. They are the words of a faithful servant who is willing to act on the strength of an inner vision.

So it seems proud Saul needs the help of someone who, at a personal level, owes Saul nothing, and has every reason to hate and fear him, but who is nevertheless willing to risk life and limb for the sake of faithfulness. Given the influence of Paul on western civilisation one wonders what the course of world history might have been had humble Ananias faltered in responding to this particular call.

The reading from Revelation transports us to a quite different place with its own set of resurrection resonances. At the beginning of Chapter 5 we find ourselves deep within John’s revelatory vision. A mighty figure is seated on a throne and is holding a rather foreboding scroll with seven seals. We don’t know what the scroll means yet, but later we find out that opening it will unleash the apocalypse and the remaking of creation. An angel proclaims loudly “who is worthy to open the scroll, and break its seals?”, and it seems at first that the answer is no-one. Then an elder tells John (who has burst into tears) that the Lion of Judah can open it. And this is the point where today’s reading starts.

We need this background because a key to understanding today’s reading is that, instead of seeing a Lion, John actually sees a Lamb standing as if slaughtered. There is a slightly shocking contrast between what John is expecting to see (the Lion of Judah with its associations from Genesis of devouring prey and regal authority), and what John actually sees (a slaughtered lamb with seven eyes and ears). It seems that the one who is worthy to trigger both destruction and the remaking of creation afresh is not the powerful, conquering, devouring lion, but rather the innocent, sacrificed lamb.

It’s a pointed echo for us on Anzac Day. And on that note, I find it interesting, and rather heartening actually, that Australians seem to be more attracted to ‘lamb’ rather than ‘lion’ war stories : of innocent victims, rather than conquering heroes. The founding Gallipoli story, with the British wantonly and pointlessly sending to their deaths Australia’s innocent young men, with about as much concern for their welfare as a not very good grazier has for their sheep, is the classic World War I example. And in World War II the most told story has ended up being not about a difficult and complex ‘victory’, like the Kakoda trail; but rather it’s Changi — a place of intense suffering for many people including a lot who had only recently got off the boat in Singapore.

But back to Revelation. Once we find out that the lion is in fact a lamb, we do not move straight away to the very dramatic opening of the seals and the riding out of the four horsemen of the apocalypse in chapter 6. No, first we get a really long pause in the action for the most extraordinary scene of praise in the whole bible.

It starts off with the four living creatures and twenty four elders with golden bowls and harps singing, as John describes it, “a new song”. Next John hears all the angels and elders and saints of heaven in myriad thousands join in with a seven-fold song of praise “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.”

Then John notices that all living creatures everywhere have joined in. The whole thing is about as dramatic a worship scene as imaginable. And the great cry of all assembled living creation is both to the father and the son together — “to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might”. This is quite a crescendo.

Now, after Saul's conversion and the near symbolic overload of that scene in Revelation, you could be forgiven if you had trouble tuning into our Gospel reading. The subtle and profound Chapter 21 of John's gospel, is perhaps the quintessential post-resurrection recognition story.

After all the dramas in Jerusalem, we suddenly find ourselves back by the sea of Tiberias (also known as the sea of Galilee) — the inland sea of Jesus' early teaching and healing ministry.

Simon Peter says "I am going fishing", and six other disciples say "We will go too". They may have seen the risen Jesus twice already, but this still does not sound like a particularly overjoyed bunch. And it's night and they catch nothing. Aimlessly fishing the inland sea in the dark, catching nothing? I have been there before, I think.

Then — just after daybreak — suddenly Jesus is standing on the beach. In Jesus' two preceding resurrection appearances to the disciples, John describes Jesus as having 'come' into the locked room in Jerusalem. In today's story John simply says that, at dawn, Jesus is standing there on the shore. We are left wondering did Jesus arrive during the night, or at dawn? Or is he — the light of the world — the bringer of the dawn, or even the dawn itself?

In any event it seems he is both real and physical, yet spirit-like. At first the disciples do not know it's him. This lack of recognition recalls the earlier scene in John's gospel when Mary Magdalene, in the tomb on Easter Sunday, did not recognise Jesus when she first turned to look at him — she saw only the gardener. She had to talk with Jesus and then turn towards him a second time, before she recognised him.

The disciples first hear Jesus' voice as he first asks them another a gentle question. It's framed in a way that implies the answer is already known — "children, you have no fish, have you?". Their answer is a simple "no".

Then he points them towards where they should now cast their nets, and yes they make a *huge* catch of *large* fish — so many that the net they were casting should have broken — but it didn't.

Despite this rather miraculous event, Simon Peter, the rock, still needs to be told "it is the Lord" before the penny drops. And then Peter, who, we now find out, is naked, puts on some clothes and jumps in the water. Surely this seems an odd reaction, even for the often impetuous Peter? Why?

Once the disciples reach the shore and haul in their boat with their large catch, Jesus invites them to a meal. All that fishing, only to find that that Jesus was already on the shore with a meal prepared for them. Hmmm.

Before they eat, perhaps the most curious 'recognition' related event happens. The disciples now know it is Jesus but, we are told, none of his disciples, his closest friends, dares ask him the question "who are you?". I suspect that when many long standing disciples of Jesus suddenly realise that they are in the presence of the risen Lord, they react in a similar way. (And "who are you?", you may remember, was precisely the question that Saul, who, unlike the disciples, did not know Jesus in his earthly life, did in fact ask Jesus on the Damascus road.)

Yet despite this lack of apparent reaction, Jesus feeds them anyway. In a scene that is both like, yet is different from, the last supper, he first takes the bread and then gives it to them. Then he takes the fish, and gives it to them. All very liturgical. And of course the last time Jesus fed people bread, then fish, by the shores of this same Sea of Galilee was in the great feeding of the 5,000.

After they have all eaten the meal together, Jesus puts three questions to Peter. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” to which Peter replies, “Yes Lord, I love you”

The three-fold repetition of this question, with its strange mixture of formality — “Simon, son of John”, and intimacy, “do you love me?”, at first seems odd, and maybe even slightly unfair. Until, that is, we remember that, hold on, Peter denied Jesus three times. Ah. Yes. Peter probably still has a deep, and as yet unhealed, wound doesn’t he?

I’ve been reflecting on what I think my reactions might have been in Peter’s situation. If I had betrayed someone I really loved by denying I even knew him, particularly after he had told me I would do this, and I had protested to him that I, no I wouldn’t, I doubt I would have the courage even to face him. Particularly if he had then been killed in a terrible and shameful death and I felt partly responsible. A simple, loving, statement that he forgave me might help a bit, but I actually think it would probably make my guilt and shame worse. Had he showed up when in my nakedness I was clearly just me, I think I too might have been inclined to try and put on some coverings and dive into the water — perhaps, like Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, if only in an almost gut response of wanting to run away and hide. (But perhaps with the difference that jumping in the water is, in its own way, a kind of baptism, is it not?)

Now, looked at this way, I think Jesus actually gave Peter what was perhaps his only way out. Which was neither to castigate, nor even to draw out his previous behaviour — he does not need to, they both know what has gone on between them. But rather the risen Jesus asks him, a bit like Saul, a deeply intimate and relational question in that formal, almost ritualised, manner which surely speaks to Peter’s whole being — “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”. This question, ever so gently, gives Peter an opportunity to re-engage with Jesus his friend, and by the three repetitions of the question, to repent each one of his three earlier denials. It’s a question that neither blames, nor even forgives, but rather goes straight to the one thing that really matters — whether or not he loves. And answering Jesus’ question not only heals Peter, but also takes the relationship between them to a new level of intimacy. They now have a past between them which is not, cannot be, forgotten, but which has been re-integrated in such a way that surely makes Peter a deeper, fuller person. And in part this is because Peter has also come to realise that he needs to do something to make his protestations concrete — “Feed my lambs” “Tend my sheep”. Be a good shepherd.

Even so, after the third repetition of the question, Peter finally breaks his previous pattern with a human (and quite reasonable) outburst — “Lord, you know that I love you.” And with that Peter, now healed and able to talk with his Lord and friend again, is able to be told the confronting news about his final fate. It is then we start to sense the full impact of Jesus’ final, haunting words — “follow me”.

Encounters with the risen Christ are transformational experiences. It is these that teach us just how closely intertwined are Good Friday and Easter Sunday : how the new life of the resurrection *needs* the death that preceded it. If, much later in his life, we could have asked Saint Peter when he thought his life began again, I suspect his answer would have been that it was when he heard the cock crow and Jesus turned to look at him. Because surely it was then that something deep within him died. Something critical to who he was which, as he would only discover later, only the risen Lord could bring back to life. And he would then understand that it was this experience that caused him to grow, and which gave him the eyes to see suffering from the inside, and thus to equip him first to feed Jesus’ lambs, and then to be dragged to a place where he did not want to go.

Peter's story also suggests that rebirth is neither automatic nor necessarily comfortable though. Suffering can just stay as suffering if we do not engage. I sort of have the feeling that if Peter had not had this encounter with the risen Lord (and remember it only happened as the last of three encounters) he might have spent the rest of his life sadly fishing the inland sea in the dark, still catching nothing.

Jesus is still standing there, in the fair light of a new morning, by the shores of the inland sea, pointing us where to fish, feeding us, and, as both Lion and lamb, remaking creation, including the creation that is each of us. And he is in other places too. Like the stranger on the road to Emmaus; and with Saul and Ananias on the road to Damascus. And it's at least partly up to us to hear his presence in other stories and other lives too, like the messily human stories of Anzac Day, and in our own lives.

As we walk with Him, and respond to His questions (which will, like Saul's and Peter's, probably be both universal and intensely personal), then perhaps we too will see in our hearts, as our gospel hymn put it, the miracle of the green shoots sprouting from the seed that fell to the ground and was hidden.

Please allow me to finish by recalling part of today's psalm 30 with its great thanksgiving for healing:

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning ...
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.
So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.