

Daniel's Reflection for week Easter Sunday 2019–

Easter Sight

I have long wondered why the risen Jesus was unrecognized by Mary and the disciples. But something clicked in my heart as I recently listened to Timothy Radcliffe. It wasn't, he said, that they knew him before and did not recognize him now. It was more that they never really knew him, or rather, as Herbert McCabe put it, 'they thought they knew him,' and now they were meeting the real Jesus as if for the first time. The miracle of Easter was already opening their eyes. The blindfold preventing them from fully recognizing him before was now being removed. Love was bringing clear vision. It was transforming the blurred, the false; it was revealing the real, the beautiful. For one bright moment they glimpsed pure truth.

The disciple came to the Master. 'What makes one enlightened?' he asked. 'The ability to recognise,' the Master replied. 'Recognise what?' 'The butterfly in a caterpillar, the eagle in an egg, the saint in a selfish human being.' In one of John O'Donohue's last poems he speaks to the mother of a young criminal.

No one else can see beauty
In his darkened life now.
His image has closed
Like a shadow.
But he is yours; And you have different eyes
That hold his yesterdays
In pictures no one else remembers.
He is yours in a way no words could ever tell;
And you can see through the stranger
this deed has made him
And still find the countenance of your son.'

The gift of true seeing has always been at the heart of Christianity. Easter is about taking away rather than about adding on; more about subtraction than addition; more about unblocking than increasing. It happened to those on the road to Emmaus. Pope Benedict, in *Spe Salvi* writes, 'Before (the risen Christ's) gaze all falsehood melts away . . . The holy power of his love sears through us like a flame.' No wonder their hearts burned within them. And then, before their very eyes, the fierce invincibility and utter vulnerability of our human God were constellated in a fistful of bread on the rough surface of a stained table in a country inn.

Easter is the death of illusion, the window of recognition, the work of restoration. Redemption is the clear courageous vision of what happens, of what is. Too often, in our fear of naked 'isness,' we shrink from it. While we are created for truth we cannot bear too much reality! 'We would rather be ruined than changed;' wrote W.H. Auden, 'we would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and see our illusions die.' Thus, as Francis Thompson knew, 'with our estranged eyes we miss the many-splendoured thing.'

‘Something prevented them from recognizing him.’ What a striking way of putting it! Maybe the ‘thing’ that prevented them wasn’t a thing at all. Maybe it was an absence that still blinded them – the absence of a fully purified vision. Love fills in the gaps and heals the flaws. It sees perfection from within, the beauty already there. We call it the sacrament of presence – of real presence. . . . Only love can catch the truth. The hidden Christ, in the sightless tomb, had embraced and transformed all that blurs and blinds. Everything around him that morning was epiphany. It was about recognition. What was until then partially perceived now found its fullest definition. Those who loved and suffered most recognised him first – the beloved disciples John and Mary.

When a lover says to the beloved ‘You are beautiful’ the grateful reply ‘You have made me so’ is often made. But it is not the whole truth. What happens is that we first recognize and then draw out the real beauty already there within the other. The tenderness that comes from long looking silently persuades the shy and frightened loveliness of the other to emerge. The risen Jesus was like a prism that shone through the fog of human confusion, astonishing people with a brief glimpse of their own true colours, bringing the surprise of beautiful hope to despairing lives.

Only with the painfully purified heart do we see rightly. There is an apprenticeship to the vision of love. The disciples heading for Emmaus had to learn the steps. So must we. To be sure, it is gift. But gift, like surprise, favours the prepared heart. First, the wise one counselled, try to see and love a stone. Then try to truly see and love a cloud. Wait awhile and begin to love a petal, a bird, a star; and then, and only then, try to see and love a human being. ‘Christ’, Thomas Aquinas insisted, ‘is rising.’

Anything, anywhere, anytime can be the beginning of this apprenticeship into the really real. Nothing is too insignificant to be an epiphany of eternity. And when it happens, like the first Easter, it stays for ever. ‘You must know’, wrote John Paul II, that there is no return from this vision.’ In Memory Thomas Aldrich writes about the moment the eyes of his heart were blessed with true sight,

My mind lets go a thousand things,
Like dates of wars and deaths of kings,
And yet recalls the very hour –
‘Twas noon by yonder village tower,
and on the last blue noon in May –
the wind came briskly up this way,
crisping the brook beside the road;
then, pausing here, let down its load
of pine-scents, and shook listlessly
two petals from that wild-rose tree.

(Adapted from a Tablet article, Daniel O’Leary 2014)