

Death and Resurrection: from the Old to the New

Isaiah 43:16-21

2 Corinthians 5:14 - 6:2

Easter 3

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HURC

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Within the lower regions of the Arctic and the Antarctic during their respective winters because of the tilt of the earth's axis the sun does not shine and it is perpetual night. When spring arrives in both of these extreme regions its effect is momentous in that it brings to the frozen landscape the first rays of sunlight. When the sun first strikes the benighted land a thaw begins, animals and plants come out of their winter hibernation, and in a matter of weeks the landscape is transformed.

The second verse of the hymn we sang to open our worship today employs this same imagery of light transforming darkness to express the effect of resurrection of Jesus Christ:

See the spring of souls today;
Christ has burst his prison,
and from three days' sleep in death
as a sun has risen;
all the winter of our sins,
long and dark, is flying
from his light, to whom we give
laud and praise undying.¹

Jesus's death frees us from the old way of being; Jesus's resurrection frees us for a new way of being. This is what the Apostle Paul believes when in a compact statement, he writes:

¹ The second verse of the hymn 'Come, ye faithful, raise the strain' by John of Damascus, translated by JM Neale, *Rejoice and Sing* 236, © United Reformed Church, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old order has gone; behold, a new order has come.

2 Cor. 5:17

It is not easy for Christians to claim, with the Apostle Paul, that 'the old order has gone and a new order has come' when we switch on the news and learn about a preventable refugee crisis caused by preventable wars and preventable political responses to famines. Where is the 'new creation'? Where is the new order and new state of affairs of which Paul speaks? Do Christians with our talk of resurrection and new life seem rather like Pollyannas or like those who whistle in the dark? Does not our hope seem to fly in the face of what appears to be a dismal and worsening state of affairs in the world today?

Wars and famines and brutality and injustice are precisely the symptoms and expression of the old order from which people need to be delivered and redeemed. Jesus's death and resurrection holds out deliverance and redemption to all. However, not all are willing to embrace the deliverance and redemption that Jesus has achieved, which is why the old state of affairs holds sway in so many situations.

The transition from the old to the new effected by Jesus's death and resurrection is the central theme of Easter. Easter, I remind you, is not merely one day but is the season that includes seven Sundays in the Church's Year, and we are currently in the middle of it. In fact, every Sunday, every Lord's Day, when Christians gather to worship we acknowledge as a matter of faith that Jesus Christ has died and is risen.

Let us try to understand how the Apostle Paul believes that Jesus's death frees us from the old way of being. The first striking thing that Paul writes is:

...one man died for all therefore all humankind has died. 5:14

We are accustomed to understanding Jesus's death as a substitution: that he died *for* others, by which we mean *in the place of* others. But Paul is saying much more here: he is saying that Jesus's death was universally representative in that when he died, *all humankind died with him*. Since all humankind has evidently not actually died, what does Paul mean by 'died' here? He explains what he means in the next sentence:

He died for all so that those who live should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life. 5:15

What has died when Christ died is humanity's deadly orientation. Since Paul believes that God is the source and goal of human life, to be turned away from God or alienated from God in the way one lives one's life is a kind of living death. To be turned towards God, in fellowship with him, in right relationship with him, is to have life in its fullest sense. Paul believes that what Jesus has done in his death is to kill off the slavery to the life that is turned away from God. In other words, because of what Jesus has achieved we now have a choice—a choice that prior to Christ's redeeming work was not available to us—to turn away from alienation and turn towards reconciliation.

The effects today of the life turned away from God and instead turned in on oneself, or turned in on one's family, or turned in on one's tribe are evident. The self is often a tyrant. We are often our own worst enemies. I'm thinking here of the many forms of self-absorption: narcissism, selfishness, and

neuroticism. In one way or another the problem is that the self assumes such a large part in one's thinking that it eclipses and blocks out the light that can liberate. The primary light that can liberate is the light and glory of God our heavenly Father. The secondary light that can liberate is the light and reflected glory of other people.

Yet to be turned in on family and tribe can be just as much an enslavement. People who suffer at the hands, or the tongues, of family member know what I mean about the enslavement of family. Tribalism can be even worse in its effects when ethnic groups turn on their neighbours in betrayal and violence, such as is happening today in Burundi and Syria. In these islands we are familiar with the problem of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Whenever we view the other as a threat we close ranks and are less free than we would otherwise be if we were able to be open and hospitable.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus's death frees us from the old way of being, and his resurrection frees us for a new way of being. The old order is that which is distorted by sin. It is one of enslavement and fear, where the rich oppress the poor, the strong bully the weak, the clever humiliate the simple, and where differences become the source of division and enmity.

By contrast to the old order of division and enmity, the new order to which Paul refers reconciles and unites. The new order is one of forgiveness, assurance, and joy. In the new order: the rich empower the poor, the poor remind the rich; the strong protect the weak, the weak soften the strong; the able assist those less able, the less able provide the able with an opportunity to show solidarity.

And what is it that marks the distinction between the old order and the new for each of us? For Paul, the distinction depends on how we respond to Jesus Christ. The only thing that matters is how we respond to God's offer of friendship through Jesus Christ. Put simply: will you be a friend of God or not?

This, then, is Paul's sole criterion for regarding others: have they or have they not accepted God's offer of friendship through Jesus Christ? And the advantage of this criterion over all the others is that it is accessible to everyone. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, strong or weak, able or less able: all may respond to this offer of friendship with God through Christ. But in order to accept this offer, we must make the transition with Christ from the old order to the new; and this is the challenging part.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people's sins against them. 5:19

Sin is all the ways in which we construct barriers against one another. Sin is the self-centredness and vested interest that causes us to ignore the need of the other. Sin is the hurt we inflict again and again both upon ourselves and upon others. The message of reconciliation that Christians are commissioned to live and to share is the good news of the gospel: when we trust in what God has done for us in Christ, he does not count our sins against us but forgives us. Hence the appeal that Paul makes to the Corinthians, and to us: "Be reconciled to God." (5:20)

Canon Mark Oakley's grandfather would never speak of his wartime service as a navigator on a Lancaster Bomber, except once to his grandson, when he mentioned Dresden and wept.

Years later Mark Oakley preached at service in Dresden's Frauenkirche, the city centre Lutheran Church that was almost completely demolished by Allied bombardment and was rebuilt in 2005. After preaching at the service, Mark Oakley was travelling in a taxi when the taxi driver asked him why he was in Dresden. Mark took a deep breath and told him what he was there for and that his grandfather had taken part in the bombing raid of 14 Feb 1945 but could never speak of it. The driver was quiet, and then said 'That was the night my mother was killed.' Then he stopped the car, put out his arm and said; 'And now we shake hands'.²

To acknowledge the hurt and then forgive and move on, this is the divine risk of an outstretched arm that makes a future possible. Jesus is God's outstretched arm offered in reconciliation to us. The challenge to every person is: will we let our resentment and enmity be crucified with Christ in order that we can be resurrected with Christ to forgiveness and reconciliation? Will we allow Jesus's death to free us from the old way of being and Jesus's resurrection to free us for a new way of being?

² My account of the story that Mark Oakley told in his Good Friday Meditation broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 25th March 2016