The Inhabited World

May 5th, 2019

Easter 3

The early apostles celebrated and proclaimed life in the resurrection of Jesus. Not only did they preach the resurrection of Christ, miraculous resurrections were also attributed to them. The apostle Peter raised the kind widow Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43); the apostle Paul raised the young man Eutychus who fell from a window (Acts 20:7-12). Long after the New Testament was written, legends about the apostles continued to circulate, and despite the passage of time and the mingling of folklore with these stories, the themes of the resurrection and the mystery of redemption continued to be attached to their ministry. In the *Golden Legend,* the apostle Andrew raises a young man and forty sailors; he preaches redemption through the cross before being tortured and crucified by a tyrant Aegeus (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Selections.* Tr. Christopher Stace. London: Penguin, 1998). The resurrection speaks to humanity of the love of God—for these are uniquely human events in which God has demonstrated his power over the one thing that plagues human life most. Death and sin are the prison that prevent us from being what we should and could be.

The mystery of redemption and the resurrection, however, is not merely about our experience. It is obviously inseparable from Christ; it is really the experience of Christ that is shared out with us, much as the communion bread and wine are the sharing of his body. Long before the cross, however, Jesus warned his adversaries, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matthew 12:39). As Brant Pitre explains, “The story of Jonah is the story of his death and resurrection…What does all this mean for how Jesus understands his own death and resurrection? Once the biblical background of his proclamation about Jonah is clear, everything he says makes perfect sense. To begin with, the scribes and Pharisees demand a ‘sign’ from Jesus—that is, a miracle of some sort meant to prove who he really is (Matthew 12:38). In response, Jesus declares that the only ‘sign’ that will be given to his generation is the sign of the prophet Jonah. What is this miraculous sign? Scholars debate whether it refers to the miraculous rescue of Jonah or the miraculous repentance of the Gentiles. The answer is both. And the same thing is true of the sign of the Son of Man. The ‘sign of Jonah’ is both the resurrection of the Son of Man on the third day and the repentance of the Gentiles that will follow his resurrection” (Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus.* New York: Image, 2016. 188). Since Jesus performed many signs and taught many things, it seems that his reference to “only one sign” suggests that all of his signs, teachings, parables and miracles, all of his mission is understood through this one sign of the resurrection. This is what he desires. And it is important to view the resurrection, the one and only sign of Jesus, as much as possible, from the perspective of Jesus.

In old Japanese gangster films, you might often hear the word *shaba.* This is a Sanskrit word *saha* that came into the Japanese language through Buddhism. It really means this inhabited the world with its illusions and corruptions. The word “inhabited world” reminded me of the Russian title for the Strugatsky novel *Prisoners of Power,* which is Обитаемый остров, which translates as “inhabited island”—a reference to the abandoned or uninhabited island of *Robinson Crusoe* and similar adventure stories. In that novel, a traveler through time and space arrives at a planet scarred by radioactivity, tyranny and the wounds left by genocidal wars. It sounds messianic and familiar. To return to the word *shaba*. It is this inhabited world, the world of suffering, the world of endurance (*Wiktionary*). In Japanese gangster slang, however, it is the world outside of prison. It’s the inhabited world of freedom. I thought it was fitting to think of the resurrection in these terms because Jesus was crucified like a criminal and went down into the world of death, which the apostle Peter compares to a prison: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 18:19). And Psalm 102 says: “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord: that he looked down from his holy height; from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, that they may declare in Zion the name of the Lord, and in Jerusalem his praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the Lord” (Psalm 102:18-22). Jesus went into our prison, our death, to redeem us. And then the Spirit raised Him and set Him free, that we might be set free. The resurrection, however, did not send Jesus straight from the tomb to the heavens above. There is immense theological importance in that Jesus was not raised to heaven but to earth before ascending to the Father. Jesus returned to *shaba,* to the inhabited world. And if the resurrection is Jesus’ escape or release from prison, it is natural for us to ask: what did Jesus desire in his resurrection freedom? I have known a number of ex-convicts over the years. One wanted to escape his guilt, which prison did not expiate. One wanted to get a university degree and was studying hard for it. One wanted to smoke crystal meth. One wanted to see his son who lived far away. What about ourselves—when we get out of our spiritual prisons? James K.A. Kirk writes: “What do you *want*? That’s the question. It is the first, last, and most fundamental question of Christian discipleship. In the Gospel of John , it is the first question Jesus poses to those who would follow him. When two would-be disciples who are caught up in John the Baptist’s enthusiasm begin to follow, Jesus wheels around on them and pointedly asks, ‘What do you want?’ (John 1:38). It’s the question that is buried under almost every other question Jesus asks each of us. ‘Will you come and follow me?’ is another version of ‘What do you want?,’ as is the fundamental question Jesus asks of his errant disciple Peter, ‘Do you love me?’ (John 21:16 NRSV). Jesus doesn’t encounter Matthew and John—or you and me—and ask, ‘What do you know?’ He doesn’t even ask, ‘What do you believe?’ He asks, ‘What do you want?’ This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us” (James K.A. Kirk, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016. 1). And it is a question that we can also ask of Jesus if we are to understand anything of his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Returning to *shaba,* what does Jesus want?

In the resurrection appearances, we see Jesus expressing his deepest desire. In the inhabited world, he shows Mary Magdalene that the division between God and humanity has been removed. She must not cling to him; she must live without his immediate presence until her resurrection, but he is ascending “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17). Jesus wants to announce that she is a child of God now. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus wants to reveal himself through teaching the inspired written word, through breaking bread in communion, through his walking side by side with the disciples on the road of life, through simply being there (Luke 24:13-35). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 28:10), and then later commissions them to go out into the world to teach and baptize because, as he says, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). The Gospel of Mark proclaims the victory of the Lord Jesus over all that would harm (Mark 16). In John’s Gospel, Jesus blesses those who do not see and believe (John 20:29), but he also appears to the disciples to proclaim: “Peace be with you!”; “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:19-22). In returning to the world inhabited by us, Jesus is inhabiting the world. God has come to dwell in our world—in us and among us. The world is now inhabited by God.

The most idyllic resurrection appearance is the last one recorded in the gospels, which we have read today. Jesus appears on the shores of Galilee to see his friends engaged in what they loved—the very thing they did when Jesus first met them. They are fishing. And Jesus loves that fact. Though he called them to follow him and they abandoned their nets, Jesus never despised who they were or how they made their living. In the resurrection, Jesus comes to rejoice in their everyday activity of struggling to catch fish. And, just as he did at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is willing to help them—not just physically to catch 153 fish, but spiritually, to remind them that even after the resurrection, he is still the same Jesus who loves them, the same Jesus who likes miraculous catches of fish. The one who calls them to be catchers of humans—catching them from the claws of prison in *shaba*, to set them free, the Jesus whose mission is salvation.

The desire of Jesus is shown concretely and explicitly in his interaction with Peter after the breakfast of bread and fish on the beach: “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’” (John 21:15-17). Peter was struggling and hiding in his guilt. And Jesus came to disagree with his own willful imprisonment. As Vince Vitale remarks: “Jesus knows the truth about us. He knows every time we have done something we shouldn’t have. He knows every way in which we are against Him. And yet He does not hold it over our heads. He allowed it to be held over His head. He didn’t make a play for power, but He set aside His power in order to love and to serve. Jesus disagreed with us. His very coming was an act of disagreement with us—a statement that we required saving because our lives have disagreed so badly with what He intended for them. In the life that He lived, the things that He taught, and the way that He laid down his life, Jesus is the greatest expression of God’s disagreement with us; and yet, simultaneously, Jesus is the greatest expression of God’s love for us” (Vince Vitale, “Love the Truth” in *Jesus Among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* by Ravi Zachaias and Vince Vitale. New York: Faith Words, 2017. 222). Peter was trapped in sin and guilt, but Jesus does not directly mention the three denials. Those denials were already nailed to the cross and buried in the earth. What does Jesus want from Peter? Only to give him everything through his love—forgiveness, life eternal, joy. Jesus wants Peter to be his friend and follower. Jesus wants a relationship with Peter.

Love is the most important thing to Jesus in the resurrection. That is why he appeared to Mary and to Thomas; that is why he reassured and encouraged the disciples; that is why he told them to receive the Holy Spirit, who pours the love of God into our hearts and abides in us (John 20:19-22; Romans 5:5); that is why he commissions them to go out into the inhabited world and convert the inhabitants to freedom and salvation. The giver is inseparable from the gift. You cannot have one without the other. For God is love. God is salvation. Salvation is not an act or an axiom. Salvation is Christ himself and his love. And the resurrection manifests that love and that desire for others, “rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man” (Proverbs 8:30-32). Jesus could have talked about anything at breakfast, but he wanted to talk to Peter about their friendship.

And that is what Jesus wants to talk to you about today. Do you love Jesus? Are you going to be his friend? Are you going to follow the Risen Jesus and be set free from your prison? Will you be baptized and live like Him? Will you receive God? Ravi Zacharias has noted: “*The Great Books of the Western World,* published in the 1950s, gave the longest space to the theme of ‘God,’ addressed by the most notable Western thinkers of the day. When Mortimer Adler, the editor, was asked why that theme occupied such length when many other notable themes were given less space, he answered without hesitation, ‘Because more consequences for life and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from any other basic question.’” (Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus Among Secular Gods*). The message of Jesus to his disciples in the resurrection is the same as the first time he appeared on the shores of Galilee to surprise them with nets full of fish. *Follow me.* Because nothing has more consequences for your life and your actions to follow, but also because nothing pleases the Risen Christ more than to be with you throughout all time. To return to James K.A. Kirk: “Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of what we’re made for, of the end to which we are called. This is why Paul’s exhortation to ‘put on love’ (Col. 3:14) is equivalent to the exhortation to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 13:14 NRSV). This is how we become human. This is what we’re ‘here for.’ And how does that happen? By being regularly immersed in the drama of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (Kirk, *You Are What You Love.* 90). “It is more necessary to learn to call on the name of God than it is to breathe” (*The Way of the Pilgrim.* Tr. Helen Bacovin). You are what you love. And Jesus wants you to love Him, to love Your salvation, to follow Him in freedom and friendship into the inhabited world.