

Sunday, April 10th, 2016, Third Sunday in Easter

Readings: Acts 9:1-21, Psalm 30, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19

The Easter Person: Deconstructed, Reconstructed

Introduction

Some time ago, in my early twenties in fact, I found myself in a place called the Falls Rd in Belfast, the seat of the then sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants. On one of the so-called 'peace lines' – in effect high cement walls separating the communities – was the graffiti, *I believe in life before death*. In a place where death stalked everyone, the statement fell like a thunder-clap upon me. On the one hand, it neatly challenged the misery of the place. On the other, it defied, it disputed the traditional exclusive Christian preoccupation with life *after* death, pointing out that *life before death* – something most northern Irishmen had not experienced for years – was equally important.

Since first seeing the graffiti in Belfast I have had time to digest it. In fact, it has had a real effect upon the way I see things and the way I see the Christian life. Today I would say that this very declaration, sums up the world-view of the Easter Person, the person who believes in resurrection, the person who becomes a means, a channel, a conduit for resurrection in the here and now..

Let's begin our thinking together about the Easter Person with the story Broken Beaks (*Broken Beaks, Nathaniel Lachenmeyer, illustrated Robert Ingpen, Michelle Anderson Publishing, Melbourne, 2003*) then move to the readings today about Christian conversion; and then finish with a film clip.

Broken Beaks

The story, as you heard is about a broken sparrow who has to contend not just with his broken beak but with the reactions to it. Unable to feed himself, other sparrows see him as different, as blameworthy for his own situation; and as he declines becoming thinner and scraggier, he is persecuted, considered a complete outsider - not a sparrow at all. He is a victim, a scapegoat. What we hear in the story is that it takes another victim, another scapegoat, suffering from another sort of broken beak, from emotional and mental breakdown and social exclusion, to recognize and respond to him. Indeed, both see in the other's persecution and victimhood, not just brokenness, but *in their togetherness* a sign, an anticipation of something else altogether – a world *without* brokenness, a world of life *rather* than death. "Then, they both fell asleep – and dreamed that they lived in a world without broken beaks."

In a sense these two together, sparrow and human being, represent the collective Easter person; for like that anonymous Irish graffitist, they celebrate life in the present, in the here and now, they challenge, defy the violence, the exclusion, the scapegoating, the death imposed upon them.

The Readings

What has this to do with Christian conversion? A lot! In fact as we read both Paul's and Peter's experiences of conversion, different as they are; we discover something in common, something that they share: namely that conversion is about becoming a conscious conduit for life, for inclusion, for peaceable-ness. But we also learn that there are two different stages of conversion: de-construction and re-construction.

Paul

In Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, we hear of a dramatic blinding light and the resurrected Jesus questioning him. Paul ends up in worse shape than before. He's blind, he has to be led by the hand to where he's going, and he does not eat or drink for three days. He has virtually no energy left and is almost completely cut off from the world. It is a process of what psychologists call *deconstruction*: dismantling, painfully removing and dismembering the structure, the system that had previously contained what he, Paul *knew* to be true. But what had the erudite Jewish theologian Paul known to be true? That the Christian sect within the life of the Jewish synagogue was misled, dangerously wrong in its following Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, Paul had lent himself to, had become a conduit for persecution of this minority, convinced that only a thorough creedal cleansing, a social crucifixion of these people could resolve the problem. The Christians were to be victimized persecution was the answer, sacred, religious violence the means. Remember, the question of Jesus to Paul was "Why do you persecute me?" In other words, why do you persecute the people who follow me?

Peter

Peter's experience focuses less upon conversion's deconstructive moment, and more the reconstructive moment. The threefold question, "Do you love me", takes Peter back to the week before, when he had denied Jesus three times: that moment just prior to Jesus' interrogation and crucifixion. Both experiences: that of denial and deconstruction the week before, and that of reconstruction now, occur around two charcoal fire-places. The first, the *sacrificial fire* marks Peter's participation in the political violence of the mob as they bay for Jesus' blood. The second, the *fire of reconciliation and forgiveness*, marks Peter's final conversion, his reconstruction as he disassociates himself from the violence against Jesus in which he was complicit and associates himself with Jesus the victim and a new world view entirely.

Christian conversion then is about the conversion to Jesus, yes, but – and this is what is usually missed – it is also about conversion to a particular way; seeing reality, interpreting reality through the eyes of Jesus the victim, Jesus the scapegoat, Jesus the crucified. In their conversions both Paul and Peter experience a dramatic re-aligning of their world view and their alliances. Both move from associations with the powerful to associations with the victims of power, both ultimately share the lot of the victims of power, the lot of those with broken beaks. In their deconstruction and reconstruction they are Easter people, who from their new alliances with victims, believe in resurrection, Easter people who become a means, a channel, a conduit for resurrection, *for life before death, for a world with no broken beaks*.

For several years I was resident studying and teaching at Boston University, the alma mater of Martin Luther King. King was a thoroughly deconstructed and reconstructed person, an Easter person, in the shadow of Paul and Peter, an Easter person who came to be a conduit for resurrection, *for life before death, for a world with no broken beaks*. The night before he died, April 3rd 1968 he spoke at the Mason Temple Church in Memphis Tennessee, in support of the Memphis Sanitation Strikers, garbage workers who sought justice. Identifying with the victims ultimately meant sharing their lot. Let us listen!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oehry1JC9Rk>