

Sunday, April 17th, 2016, Fourth Sunday in Easter

Readings: Acts 9: 36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

An Easter Society: One without Victims

Introduction

What does an Easter world, a resurrected world look like? If as we Christians claim, Jesus' resurrection has as much to do with the transformation of life *before* death, as *after* it, as much to do with *current* life as the *after*-life; then *what* are the signs of this Easter, this resurrected world and *where* do we look for them?

Last week we looked for signs of resurrection in the *converted individual*, in the transformed human being. We spoke of the necessity of two stages to Christian conversion: *deconstruction*, where my old world view, my place in it and how I live, what I do, is surrendered; and *reconstruction*, where the new world view and my place in it is lived out. We saw this deconstruction-reconstruction behaviour take place in the experience of both the apostles, Paul and Peter: Paul on the road to Damascus and Peter by the lake. In both cases the men re-align their world views and alliances – both *understand* that witnessing to a resurrected world means criticizing the current religious, social and political arrangements characterized by death and injustice; both *move* from associations with power in one form or another, to relationships with the victims of power; and both *ultimately share* the lot of power's victims, the lot of Jesus himself – violent death. Both *pay the price* as conduits for the vision of a resurrected, transformed world, a world with no “broken beaks”, to quote the children's story.

So much for the resurrected, deconstructed-reconstructed individual: but can we speak of something larger, an *Easter or resurrected society*? I think so! After all that is what Paul and Peter lived and died for. What then might it look like? In thinking this through let's use again this deconstructed-reconstructed framework and let's begin with the Gospel reading, moving later to the film *Philadelphia*.

Reading

This reading, part of John's Gospel continues the conversation about the Shepherd and the sheep; in fact this is the tail end of that discussion. On a first reading we pick-up that this is about Jesus speaking mysteriously, enigmatically about his sheep who recognize his voice and those others who do not. On a first reading, it all seems rather sweet, reassuring: after all we instinctively read this passage through the Christian lens of us as the sheep and Jesus our Shepherd. But there is more to this sheep-shepherd image than that. This imagery about sheep is not about a picturesque pastoral scene; the context to this is quite the opposite; the ritual slaughter of sheep as sacrificial animals for the Temple festival.

Behind this stand two levels of violence: the first, the celebration of the Feast of Dedication (*Channukah*) recalling, celebrating the violent Maccabean revolt years before, where violence was deemed as a legitimate social solution to the Jewish struggle against Rome. The second, more importantly, reflects the sacrificial system: a sort of theologically justified class system internal to

Judaism, where rules of ritual purity keep the various parts of society in their place; women inferior to men and outsiders inferior to insiders. In short, the purity system ensured, facilitated discrimination, the purity system guaranteed victimization, where significant minorities were deemed to be black-sheep, where significant minorities were no more than scapegoats of the system: innocent parties objectified as dangerous to the community. What is significant in this reading is that Jesus embraces, owns the 'sheep', Jesus identifies with those who are scapegoated. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, because he defends them, he stands with them, even to the point of his own death. These sheep then are not so much the literal sheep who are sacrificed in the Temple rituals, but the human beings who are nevertheless sacrificed, human beings who are no more than victims of the purity system: that social, political and religious system put in place by the Temple.

From a Jesus' perspective then the fundamental sign of an Easter, a resurrected society would be one that does its best to address the difficulty, the injustice of victims and victimization, in particular those groups of people who are objectified as scapegoats. This would be part of society's deconstruction: eliminating the abuse. While we can be sure that Jesus' sacrificial society persecuted particular groups, passing them off as in some way guilty, can we say this same dynamic exists in our own society? I can readily identify three groups with whom I have worked pastorally and politically in the last 20 years: the first the Gay community during the 1980s and 1990s when HIV and AIDS terrified everyone; the second group, very much a current disturbing reality, not because of them but rather because of what we do to them - asylum seekers and bridging visa holders: and third, the Australian indigenous community. All have experienced persecution, scapegoated as guilty in one way or another.

In our clip from the film *Philadelphia*, the reality of the Gay community during the 1990s is exceptionally well portrayed; Andrew Beckett represents in the minds of the executives of his legal firm the guilty sinner, the one who has broken the rules...according to the CEO, the Bible's rules (*Philadelphia, Clínica Estético, 1993, Scene 1.35.25 – 1.41.08*)

I still remember working pastorally with victims of AIDS in the inner city of Sydney during the early 1990s. These people died a double death – the physical yes, but before that, the spiritual, the emotional; rejected and cast out! In a society where groups are still scapegoated, we Christians need to be more intelligent and imaginative. The truth is this: that Jesus became the scapegoat, Jesus was the crucified victim, not so that we may continue to victimize and scapegoat this group or that, but so that there may be no more victims, no more scapegoats. *The cross is all about deconstructing social models of abuse and the resurrection is all about constructing alternatives which are life-giving for all, not just some.*

