

**Sunday, May, 5th, 2019, 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 what often passes as the traditional Christian preoccupation with life *after* death, pointing out that *life before death* – something most northern Irish people had not experienced for years – was equally important and as it turns out, equally Christian

I often return to that event in Belfast, drawing again and again from its meaning, as if it were water from a well. In fact, it has had a real effect upon the way I see things and the way I see the Christian life. It has fuelled my theological, philosophical and political thought for years. Today I would say to you, that this very declaration, "*I believe in life before death*" sums up the world-view of the Easter Person, the person who believes in resurrection, the person who makes him and herself 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 of Suri's Wall. I have used this tale for other purposes, drawing upon its richness and depth in other ways. But this morning, I want to use it as a beginning point, a "jumping-off" point, for our thinking about the Easter way of seeing things, the Easter way of living.

### **Suri's Wall**

The story, as you heard is about a young girl – Suri – who finds herself living behind a wall with other children. From the beginning, she is more mature for her years, given to thought and wonder in contrast to the other girls, who simply live unquestioningly and acceptingly of the reality around them. Suri yearns to see, but is impeded by her lack of height. Over time, her growth – she is taller than the others – allows her to see beyond the immediate, to what lies over the wall. And yet she sees it, not simply in terms of what it is – conflict, death and destruction – but for what it might become – harmony, life and beauty. Those final words of the story say it all:

*"Please, Suri" said Eva, "tell us what you can see"*

*Suri paused, taking in all that she saw.*

*'What can I see?'*

*She looked down at the upturned faces of the children.*

*'Oh, its beautiful, let me tell you about it.'*

The standard interpretation of this story is about the indomitable human spirit of Suri which, according to the NSW Dept of Education Notes for Years 3 and 4 students, attempts "to shelter the innocence of the other children, creating a world of magic for them to dream about...allowing their hope to live on". I think that that interpretation is patronizing, reducing, diminishing the story to 'make-believe'. I think that what stands out here is a sense of what I call "*resurrection realism*": first an acknowledgement of the human reality for what it is, but a capacity to see beyond it, to see that which it is capable of becoming.

### **The Readings**

What has this to do with Christ? A lot! In fact, for Suri to see what things really are and of what they are capable, she needs to do to things: to "deconstruct" the reality around her in terms of what she sees and knows; and then to "reconstruct" it in terms of what it might become. This is what

Christian conversion is all about: the process of deconstruction and then reconstruction: the process of coming to the realization that common frameworks of thought and interpretation that we all swallow, are often inaccurate and then coming to a re-birth, seeing the world around us in an altogether different way: of what it is capable. Let's examine the Christ experiences of both Paul and Peter. In doing so we will see how conversion in Christ works: its deconstructive and reconstructive moments.

### **Paul: Deconstruction**

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 drink or eat or 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 this 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 the problem be resolved. The Christians were to be victimized: persecution was the answer, religious, sacred 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: Reconstruction**

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, seen through the lens of victims.

### **Conclusion: The Easter Person: Deconstructed and Reconstructed**

Christian conversion then is about the conversion to Jesus, yes: but the Jesus who has been violence's victim - and who only *then*, has risen - and this is what is usually missed. In Paul's conversion, his life of religiously fuelled violence as a persecutor, is challenged and let-go-of. In Peter's conversion, his complicity in the torture and crucifixion of Jesus, is challenged and forgiven.

Both Paul and Peter pass through deconstructive and reconstructive moments. Both Paul and Peter, are challenged to reject their complicit violence in the religious and political systems of which they are a part, and only then can they begin to see the world, to live reality in a new way: not only for what it is, but for what it may become.

*"Oh its beautiful, let me tell you about it"*