

Sunday, March 29th, 2020 (Lent 5A)

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

Bend Toward Life!

Introduction

We are forever bending toward life or death. That is true physiologically: as we age, the bending, the leaning, the tilting becomes organically speaking more acute toward the latter. But bending toward life or death, or should I say, life *and* death, goes on all the time; psychologically, spiritually, and ethically. Nor is it limited to individuals, but extends to communities and societies, as we respond to the circumstances which fall to us to live out: not least the current struggle with the pandemic COVID-19.

This morning, I want to examine this idea of bending, leaning, tilting toward life. I want to do this first through the window of John's story of the Raising of Lazarus and then turn to the film clip from Rabbit Proof Fence.

The Gospel: John 11:1-45

You know this story back to front. But it is not without its problems. I am not one of those guys who thinks that a whole biblical reading hangs on one or two Greek words of the original text. In fact, I generally scoff at that sort of approach. But... "never say never", because, I think today is an exception. Let me explain!

In our reading, we find that both Martha and Mary express their disappointment that Jesus did not show up in time to heal their brother Lazarus. In the latter statement of Mary's, we hear that Jesus reacts to her distress, but his response is unclear. Most of the interpretations have suggested that he sighs heavily, as if deeply moved. The word that is translated as such, *em-brimaomai*, literally refers to the snort of a horse, and it always pertains to anger. More modern interpretations tend to use this latter translation: our reading from the message this morning, included. But the question is: why would Jesus be angry with two women, who are in distress, as they mourn the death of a brother who could have been saved, if Jesus had arrived on time? Presumably, that is the same question that biblical interpreters have asked, leading to a translation which is much softer, implying a compassionate Jesus. But... the word stands, pretty much as anger, not sighing or being moved. So, we continue confused, baffled. Some commentators have suggested, that Jesus is angry with his situation, others with the unbelief of the religious power-brigade, the synagogue leaders, who have intruded onto the scene. None of these really wash.

There is however a more convincing insight offered by recent study: and that is, that Jesus' anger is directed to the death cult that surrounds him: the death industry, the professional mourners who wail and accompany Martha to the grave. This take on Jesus' anger is sort of implied in that shortest of short verses: "He wept". The word used, suggesting his spontaneous, unrehearsed tears, is quite distinct from that employed to describe the ceremonious and orchestrated weeping and wailing of the professional mourners of the death cult (*dakruo* contrasted with *klaio*). But there is more here as well, of even greater importance. In Martha's discussion with Jesus, in answer to his assertion that Lazarus will most assuredly defeat death, she mechanically recurs to the well-known doctrinal statement that yes, he will, "on the last day" at the end of history, when time is wrapped-up. She, herself, seems more disposed to share in the commonly adopted death cult than in any real expectation that life will prevail. Jesus' response is pointed: "*I am the resurrection and I am the life*". So: what may we conclude? I think this: that within John's Gospel, more than in any other gospel of the New Testament, the most fundamental and exciting insight is *that resurrection life is now, death is overcome now!* This is not something John will negotiate.

The Film Clip: Rabbit Proof Fence

But what importance does Jesus' insistence upon resurrection life *now, in the present*, have for us in the modern age? On the face of it, we do not share the ancient world's fear of, obsession with death; we no longer betray our anxiety through sacrificial religious cults. Or do we? In the modern philosophical world, there is much attention paid to the way in which we moderns have never escaped the anxiety of death, never been able to expunge death from our subconscious any more than the ancients. We are, if the modern German philosopher, Martin Heidegger is to be believed, marked by what he called "being toward death".

But in the modern world, it is ‘the political’, not the religious, where the death cult, the sacrificial cult is still played out. We can cite numerous examples, including the many conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries. But it is often the internal civil conflicts that speak most eloquently of the human theatre of sacrificial cults, where we bend towards death: Central and South America, the Balkans, Central Africa, and most recently the Middle East. But even developed societies, bend toward death: often more subtly, more delicately, but death all the same. In the clip of the film “Rabbit Proof Fence” – see the liturgy for the YouTube URL – we see a glaring take on this, even in a place that we would seldom if ever consider – Australia.

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr AO Neville, who has authority over half-caste children, takes his job seriously. In order to protect Mollie, Daisy and Gracie – three young sisters from Jigalong, in north western Australia, he orders their relocation to Moore River Mission in the south, in order to be separated from family, to begin the process of social engineering where, these girls are channelled to eventually meet white men. In order to save these girls, to save the half-caste, “biological absorption”, as Neville termed it, was to be embraced, and Aboriginal identity would gradually die. There is here a sort of “social Darwinism”, which Mr. Neville indubitably represents. What stands out in this story, is not any sense of overt genocidal cruelty, which we may abhor – although the film points to an undeniable brutality, nevertheless – but rather, something that is increasingly common in developed societies: technical -‘scientific’ rationality, which because it is so claimed, is excused from ultimate questions of value, questions of the ethical. The problem with Mr Neville’s rationale, is that it masquerades as a strategy for life, when it is in fact the opposite, a strategy for gradualist genocide.

Jesus’ insistence upon resurrection life *in the present*, life that knows no death, rather than just life after death, serves as a key orienteer for Christians, as we evaluate, as we assess, as we discern, the way we live and the way our cultures and societies function.

Bend toward Life!