

# Father George and the New Creation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 April 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter Day A

Isaiah 65: 17-25; John 20: 1-18

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

Easter Day sermons are probably the hardest to compose. How on earth do we speak of something as extraordinarily mysterious, and utterly transformative, as the Resurrection?! Part of me, and not just the liturgical Anglican, also wonders whether an Easter Day sermon is necessary at all – and maybe you feel the same, or will do after my particular words today?! After all, the Easter stories and symbolism are so rich, with so much food for thought and our spirits, as well as embodied proclamation of good news and the living Word of God? When I think back I can also only really remember two Easter Day sermons, and even their details are somewhat hazy. One I preached myself, in particularly lively circumstances: and that might be the starter for an Easter Reflection on another occasion. The other was on the first chapters of the book of Genesis and biblical critics' theories of the Pentateuch. So that sermon was seemingly not even about Easter at all. Or was it?...

When I was growing up, I would often go with my immediate family to spend some or all of Holy Week in west London. With two aunts, and my beloved maternal grandmother whilst she was still alive, we would then share in the major services in the family parish – where indeed I was myself baptised as a child. It had a classic Anglo-Catholic tradition, with, literally and metaphorically, all the bells and whistles of Holy Week. So, among other things, on Good Friday, during the then obligatory three hours service, with fasting, I remember fainting in church on at least two occasions: I recall wonderful Palm Sunday processions through the streets, the powerful Maundy Thursday and the Holy Saturday Vigil services, and, of course, the life, colour, dynamism, and symbolism, of Easter morning. And, above all, I remember Father George Grainger, who preached that memorable Easter Day sermon on Genesis.

Father George was quite a character. On occasions he could be the rudest priest I have ever met, and I've met a few! Indeed, he could be very acerbic. When the women in my family asked for support for women's ordination, he was, for example, particularly dismissive. In contrast, the local Roman Catholic priest, a notable spiritual writer, was in favour. When this was pointed out, Father George simply gave a disdainful wave. 'Oh, what do you expect of Father Michael', he said, 'he'd even ordain a cat!' Yet, this reactionary Anglo-Catholic streak vied with one of the deepest prayerful and pastoral hearts for his people that I have ever encountered, together with an extraordinary radicalism that would sometimes break out. Not for nothing, for example, was he involved with the marches of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in that mighty peace campaign's most memorable days.

Even his commitment to wearing open sandals through the depth of the English winter testified to his commitment to a life of radical love and service, like that of St Francis. Full of such curious contradictions, he modelled what it is to be a bearer of resurrection despite our own struggles, blind spots and imperfections. All of which takes me to his Easter Day Reflection...

My Dad was quite annoyed. He deeply appreciated the biblical exegesis, drawing on up-to-date biblical scholars; for why, as he said, should lay people be denied good theology and just fed with 'Sunday School religion', or worse? Yet why, oh why, my Dad muttered in frustration, would a priest choose to preach on Easter morning on the first chapters of Genesis of all subjects, exploring the various traditions which contributed to them? For we had E, J, and P, a tribute to the founding work of the scholar Wellhausen, insights on the documentary theory of the Pentateuch, and all sorts. As a theological lecture it was quite masterly. Yet was it really an Easter sermon, fitting the climax of the wonderful Holy Week liturgical journey we had made together? Well no, but also yes...

Father George may have been over-intellectual in his sermon. Yet he was spot on about key themes in today's Gospel resurrection story. For preaching on the first chapters of Genesis on Easter Day is not a distraction. Rather those passages are clearly linked to the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the garden. To understand the Gospel story properly it is helpful to make those connections. We may not need an excursus into Pentateuchal theory to bring them alive, or necessarily probe the details of the formation of the Gospel narrative. We do however need to hold their themes together to receive the fresh light which it is trying to share with us.

Like the other biblical passage read earlier, today's Gospel speaks powerfully of resurrection in terms of new creation. That is an easily underplayed theme. Many conservative Christians notoriously speak of the cross of Christ almost exclusively in terms of sin and judgement. Resurrection is then a form of demonstrated satisfaction. Liberal and progressive Christians for their part tend to see the cross largely as a demonstration of the love of God, or as solidarity with the marginalised. Resurrection then tends to be a form of vindication or symbolic encouragement to continue to live by that love. Yet from ancient times, other Christians have also seen the cross as a renewing tree of life, rather than about death or example. Resurrection is then the expression of God's new creation, prophesied by Isaiah and others in the Hebrew wisdom tradition, and of which Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits.

A fancy way of speaking of what is happening in today's story is thus to see it as recapitulation. In modern biology this term is used for the repetition of an evolutionary or other process during development or growth. Ancient Christians did not know about that, but key figures such as Irenaeus of Lyon expressed the saving work of Christ, the cross and resurrection, in similar theological terms. As William Barclay put it:

*Through (hu)man(s) disobedience the process of the evolution of the human race went wrong, and the course of its wrongness could neither be halted nor reversed by any human means. But in Jesus Christ the whole course of human evolution was perfectly carried out and realised in obedience to the purpose of God.*

Or, as one of the great scriptural affirmations of the Resurrection has it, whereas 'in A'dam, all die. In Christ shall all be made alive.' (1 Corinthians 15.22).

Of course Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene takes place in a garden! For this Gospel passage is a kind of midrash, or creative interpretation, of both the Hebrew scriptures and the experience of Christ alive in new ways, despite the death of Jesus. This is John's Gospel's particular gift to us in understanding the Resurrection at the heart of Christian Faith. It seeks to convey to us the great reality and encouragement of Resurrection Faith, that - despite the many ways in which we have messed up our lives, our relationships, our planet - in Christ, by the grace of God, we can experience new creation and live as new creation.

We do not have to believe literally in particular details of either the Garden of Eden or John's Gospel's Garden of Resurrection to receive this truth. Even when sin and suffering have prevailed, when death and destruction seems to reign, there is always<sup>i</sup> hope, for God is always creating anew. In their poetry, the first chapters of Genesis trace the stages of old creation: the seven days of God's action in the past. Yet time is not an end. John's Gospel proclaims a new day: what the Orthodox tradition calls the eighth day of creation; or the first day of a new creation; which is why we typically meet as Christians on a Sunday, on what was the first day of a new week in the ancient world.

John's Gospel encourages us to see that the meeting of Jesus and Mary Magdalene symbolises this new creation, and that they represent us all. Jesus is the new A'dam, the new human creature, into which, through God's grace, we can all live and grow. Similarly, Mary Magdalene represents the new Eve, the source of life, as the Hebrew language has it. This is part of the theology of recapitulation, otherwise known as the spirituality of human participation in God. For, following Irenaeus of Lyon, let us be clear about its implications.

Rather than seeing our human lives and human condition as limited by the powers of death, sin, and finitude, Resurrection Faith offers us the possibilities of hope and unimaginable transformation. For the ultimate end of creation is a new divine garden. Christ's purpose is to enable us to share in it and in divine humanity. In Irenaeus' words: Jesus *'became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.'*<sup>ii</sup> Thus the theology of recapitulation, or participation in God, leads to the profound Eastern Orthodox understanding of theosis, or growing into divine humanity. For the point of Resurrection is to share in its invitation to new creation.

This brings me, in conclusion, back to Father George. Father George died, not much older than I am now, whilst still serving as a parish priest. However, to his earthly end, he continued to point to Resurrection Faith. When he heard that I was to go to theological college to train to be a priest, he asked me to visit him. Full of pain-killers to mitigate the cancer now wracking his body, he insisted on taking me into his library, full of an extraordinary number and quality of books. For, unlike too many clergy, Father George's book collection remained up-to-date, including much of the best biblical scholarship and radical theology of the day. He told me that he was dying and wanted me to take the books that would be helpful to me. Sitting in his armchair, he watched me gingerly choose a handful of particularly fine volumes. Then he encouraged me to take more, and still more. By the time we were finished, there were boxes upon boxes, and the once full bookshelves were almost empty. Meanwhile both our hearts were full of deep emotion. A handful of weeks later Father George died.

Today, some of those books are still with us: indeed, on the bookshelves of the Gillam Room here at Pitt Street Uniting Church. For Father George taught me what Resurrection is about, not just in his erudite theology, but in his life and in his giving of it away. So, I have absolutely no problem believing in Resurrection, because it lives in me, as Father George lives in me, and has lived in me, at every stage of my ministerial journey.

Like Father George, our words may or may not always hit the mark, well devised or not as they may be: but, as we give ourselves to others, so love lives and triumphs, even over the worst of the powers of death; I, and you, in Christ, and Christ in you and I.

For the greatest witness to the Resurrection, to the God-given possibilities of new creation, are you and I: as we let go of the old A'dam and the old Eve, and, without clinging to the bodies and identities we currently are, become the new A'dam and the new Eve, sharing in Christ and growing in divine humanity.

Therefore, like Jesus, with or without the books or whatever other possessions we temporarily treasure, let us give away our lives in love, that God's work of new creation may continue.

Amen. Alleluia!

---

<sup>i</sup> In *Crucified and Crowned* (SCM 1961) p.100

<sup>ii</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Preface to Book 5