Reconstructing one's life and meaning through Good Friday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Friday 18 April 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Good Friday

John 20:1-18

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

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1. They wept their truth

When I was a child, we attended Russian Orthodox services on Good Friday, when people, mostly women, always wept when they heard the story of the suffering and passion of Jesus. And my mother wept as well. And when later we attended the Slavic Evangelical church, people, mostly women, my mother also wept, always wept. People who were migrants with traumatic histories.

These tears in a public space deeply moved me in my inner being, as a child, as a teenager. In my body I identified with this unspoken but expressed pain without rational knowing. I as a child of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Sigmund Freud observed as he worked with trauma survivors, that the body expresses what we can not speak.[1] The body narrated the unsayable with a wide array of responses and emotions.

They wept their story as they identified with the suffering of Jesus. And the weeping articulated the powerlessness of the innocent sufferers. Weeping was the only form of indirect public protest against an unjust, oppressive, cruel regime, whether it was the Soviets or National Socialist Germany, or African American slaves. Weeping was the way to be most human in the face of the inhumanity of their oppressors. It was a form of agency, resistance and individuality.

The Jesus of unjust treatment, the innocent human being sent by God to live amongst us to love, care and empower us even if it meant his innocent suffering and death, this Jesus was the only One whom these migrant and oppressed peoples could identify with. This was the only One who legitimately shared and understood their life-in-death.

[1] Jean Wyatt, *Risking Difference*, 67.

2. The body expresses what is unable to be said

Christine van Boheem-Saaf builds on this notion that "*our body weeps our truth*". She argues for a new approach to listening to the truth of innocent suffering created by imperial and other forms of power other than our rational, conventional approaches. She "*claims us*" to resolve to undertake "*the ethical obligation to hear the pain which may not be expressed in so many words.*"[2]

She suggests that this new perspective was opened up by Jean-Francois Lyotard, "*who conceptualizes the atrocity of the Holocaust as [an event] in which language and narrative are no longer able to express the horror or import of the experience*."[3] Trauma, the death-in-life of innocent suffering, cannot be simplified or trivialized in descriptions.

3. The body of Jesus given for us to transform alienation

On Good Friday we seldom engage in the last words of Jesus and their implication. In Luke 23.34, as Jesus experiences the physical torture of crucifixion, he utters the words: "*O God, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*." And this is not to justify violence and oppression. Rather, it asks how do we engage those who have colonised and oppressed us when their colonial or imperial power is overcome? What is the ethics of responsibility to our former enemy?

I will look at this issue through the story of Jurgen Moltmann.[4]

> *We were the Germans [who fought for Hitler] who escaped the mass death of the world war. For everyone who survived, hundreds died. …In July 1943 I was an air force auxiliary in a battery in the centre of Hamburg, and barely survived the fire storm which the Royal Air Force's 'Operation Gomorrah' let loose on the eastern part of the city. The friend standing next to me at the firing predictor was torn to pieces by the bomb that left me unscathed. That night I cried out to God for the first time: 'My God, where are you?' And the question 'Why am I not dead too?' has haunted me ever since. Why are you alive? What gives your life meaning? Life is good, but to be a survivor is hard. One has to bear the weight of grief.*
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> *We had escaped death, but we were prisoners of war [for 5 years]. …*
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> *And then came what was for me the worst of all. In September 1945, in Camp 22 in Scotland, we were confronted with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz. They were pinned up in one of the huts, without comment.*

[2] Christine van Boheem-Saaf, *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan and Trauma*, 2.

[3] Op. cit., 2.

[4] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*. Fortress Press, 1997, 2ff

But slowly and inexorably the truth filtered into our awareness, and we saw ourselves mirrored in the eyes of the Nazi victims. Was this what we had fought for? Had my generation, as the last, been driven to our deaths so that the concentration camp murderers could go on killing, and Hitler could live a few months longer?...

The depression over the wartime destruction and a captivity without any apparent end was exacerbated by a feeling of profound shame at having to share in this disgrace. That was undoubtedly the hardest thing, a stranglehold that choked us.

Forgive them, for they do not know the horror they have caused! But when they know they will be shattered. And without forgiveness, without an ethics of responsibility by humanity, they will enter a greater alienation.

Kelly Oliver describes this as social melancholy: it is a loss of a loved self, a denigrated self, the absence of social value or acceptance.

We can hear the social shame Moltmann experienced: the feeling of inferiority and defect, with self-beratement. Oliver writes: the one "*suffering from social melancholy, experiences the shame assigned to [them] by culture as [their] own inferiority or defective being*".[5] Oliver asks, what does it mean to apologise or ask forgiveness for <u>being</u> bad, for having a defective being?[6] It is only by social support, Oliver suggests, and forgiveness. And to create as spirituality process to re-arrange one's whole inner meaning system, an inner revolt, as Julia Kristeva suggests; a questioning of one's former social authority and the internal, unseen, unconscious authority, the superego.

Conclusion

This was the testimony of Jurgen Moltmann, that his alienation was transformed by engaging his outer and inner "*enemy*". And engaging in sublimation, in reconstructing one's life and meaning through re-imaging the story of Jesus.

After WW2 he dedicated his life to become a public Christian theologian and to address the suffering of Jesus and the poor. After the war, he was challenged by the massive public suffering and the middle-class attempt to ignore it, so he became part of the emergent young German political theologians. He engaged in politics, the public good of massive numbers of people, living, traumatised and dead. Faith was not a private affair carried on in church buildings. They were inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was hanged by the Nazis, who wrote: "*Only a suffering God can help*". They were further inspired by the Jewish religious scholar Abraham Heschel who dedicated his book *The Prophets* "To the martyrs of 1940-45".

[5] Kelly Oliver, *The Colonisation of Psychic Space*, p90.

[6] Ibid, p90

For him the biblical prophets glimpsed the depth of God's heart, which burned with care for humanity.

Moltmann has been one of the key theological and reflective influences in my life since I discovered him in Switzerland during my theological studies through Zurich University.

Moltmann wrote that Jesus' suffering and being crucified reveals a crucified God. This means that the very being of God in the trinitarian form is a being who is self-giving love. The most profound expression of this is the body of Jesus, in a cruel, innocent death, and in the miracle of the resurrection. The terrible cry of Jesus on the cross as he dies is Jesus' weeping in the agony of loss of community, betrayal and total abandonment by God, weeping his truth as other human beings weep their truth.

Moltmann takes a deeper radical step. As the child of God dies on the cross, God the Parent suffers too, experiencing infinite grief. There is total separation, yet there is a new deep community formed. The Holy Spirit who is love, mutual love, flows through them into the broken world, previously separated from Divine Being. In this way, "*The whole uproar of history with all its dilemmas and its despairs continues to enter into the divine being through the pathway of the cross, there to be redeemed into the joyful future which God alone can open up*".[7]

'*It is finished*' (19:30). In John's world of thought it means, as William Loader writes,

> *Jesus has completed the task given to him, to make the God known (see also 4:34; 17:4). It is often linked to atonement models as if Jesus is saying: I have made the sacrifice of my body, which I came to make. This is not John's emphasis. Instead, the focus is Jesus' faithfulness to the God's commission in offering light and life and truth to people. The work is complete.*

Love is revealed even in the face of suffering. The effect is to reveal love and expose hate, to forgive the repentant and even to offer a new chance to failure and betrayal and so offer a new beginning.

[7] Elizabeth A Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 61.