



RETREAT

Monday 30 September 2024

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP

Resurrection: Searching in the dark

John 20. 1 - 18

Last year on retreat we mediated on how to listen to each other. How may we face our differences in hope, opening our hearts and minds to each other? Some barriers did fall and I hope that we *began* to see those with whom we disagree not as opponents but as fellow disciples, fellow seekers.

This year we have a new focus: 'How to be a missionary synodal Church.' But the foundation of all that we shall do is the same: patient, imaginative, intelligent, open-hearted listening. I even thought of repeating the same talks as at the last retreat, but you might notice! Herbert McCabe OP realised at the last moment that he was due to give a lecture to a distinguished theological society. He grabbed a lecture from his files, leapt on his motorbike and arrived just in time. When he opened his notes, he saw that he had given the same lecture to the same society a year before. 'What did you do?', I asked. 'I left out the jokes. They are the only things anyone remembers.' Your memories are surely better.

Profound listening is still the foundation of everything we shall do this year. It is, the I. L says, 'the first act of the Church' (60). The poet Amos Oz said of his grandfather: 'He listened. He did not just politely pretend to listen, while impatiently waiting for her to finish what she was saying and shut up. He did not break into his partner's sentence and finish it for her. He did not cut in to sum up what she was saying so as to move on to another subject. He did not let his interlocutress talk into thin air while he prepared in his head the reply that he would make when she finally finished. He did not pretend to be interested or entertained, he really was.'¹ Listening to God and to our brothers and sisters is the discipline of holiness.

This year we shall be reflecting on 'the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel' (I. L Introduction) to a world that 'dwells in darkness and the shadow of death.' (Luke 1.79). To guide our meditations, we shall take four resurrection scenes from St John's gospel: 'Searching in the dark', 'The locked room', 'the stranger on the beach' and 'breakfast with the Lord.' Each sheds some light on how to be a missionary synodal Church in our crucified world.

Our first scene begins in the night: 'Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.' (20.1). This is where we too are today. Our world is even more darkened by violence than a year ago. She comes looking for the body of her beloved Teacher. We too are gathered in this Synod to search for the Lord. In the West, God seems to have largely disappeared. We face not so much by atheism as a pervasive indifference.

¹ Amos OZ, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Vintage, London, 2005, p.110.

Scepticism poisons the hearts even of many believers. But all Christians everywhere are searchers for the Lord, like Mary Magdalene before dawn.

We too may even feel in the dark. Since the last Assembly, so many people, including participants in this Synod, have expressed their doubts as to whether anything is going to be achieved. Like Mary Magdalene, some say, ‘Why have they taken away our hope? We expected so much from the Synod, but perhaps there will be just more words.’

But although it is dark, the Lord is already present in the garden with Mary Magdalene and with us. Before his death Jesus said, ‘Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit’ (12.24). The seed had been sown in the rich soil of the garden by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, sown in a new tomb which no one had used. It is about to flower. The dawn is near. Like Mary Magdalene, we shall receive more than we search for if we too are open to encounter the Lord.

In the garden, we encounter three seekers, Mary Magdalene, the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter. Each one searches for the Lord in his or her own way; each has their own way of loving and each their own emptiness. Each of these seekers has their own role in the dawning of hope. There is no rivalry. Their mutual dependence embodies the heart of synodality. All of us can identify with at least one of them. Which one are you?

Tomas Halik has argued that the future of the Church depends on her ability to reach out to the seekers of our society. These are often the ‘nones’. I do not mean contemplative religious sisters, but the people who claim that they have no religious affiliation. They too often are searching for the meaning of their lives. Halik writes that Christians must thus be willing to be “seekers with those who seek and questioners with those who question”²

All of the accounts of the resurrection are filled with questions. Twice Mary Magdalene is asked why she is weeping. She asks where they have put the body. They all ask why the tomb is empty. In Mark’s account, the women ask, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us?’ (16.3). Luke’s accounts of the Resurrection are filled with questions: ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’ Jesus asks the disciples fleeing to Emmaus, ‘What are you talking about?’ Then all of the disciples: ‘Why are you frightened? Why do doubts arise in your hearts?’ (24.38). The Resurrection bursts into our lives not as bald statement of fact but in searching questions.

Profound questions do not seek information. They invite us to be alive in a new way, and to speak in a new language. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: “*Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*”³

The Resurrection is not Jesus’ life beginning again after a brief irruption, but a new way of being alive in which death has been conquered. And so it bursts into our lives in the gospels first as urgent questions which will not let us go on living in the same way. Likewise we come to this Synod with many questions, for example about the role of women in the Church. These are important questions. But they cannot be seen as just questions about whether something will be allowed or refused. That would be to remain the same sort of Church. The questions that we face should be more like those in the gospels, which invite us to live the Risen life together more profoundly.

² Tomáš HALÍK, *Patience with God*, Doubleday, New York, 2009, p.9.

³ Rainer Maria RILKE, *Letters to a young Poet*, Letter 4, July 16th 1903. Translated by N. D. Herter Norton, W.W. Norton and Company, 1934.

And so we must dare to bring to this Synod the deepest questions in our hearts, disconcerting questions which invite us to new life. Like those three seekers in the garden, we must attend to each other's questions if we are to find a renewed way to be Church. If we have no questions, or superficial questions, our faith is dead. A certain archbishop, not present with us today, said to a group of Dominican novices: 'Make sure that all of you read the Summa of Aquinas. It contains fifty-six thousand answers to all those who criticize the Catholic Church!'⁴ Aquinas would have been horrified. As a child legend has it his first question was 'What is God?' and his holiness was to refuse any answer for, he said, we are joined to God as to the unknown.

If we listen to each other's questions with respect and without fear, we shall find a new way to live in the Spirit. As I said last year, the motto of the Dominican Academy in Baghdad is: 'Here no questions are forbidden.' We are Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter, and it is only together that we shall find the Lord who is waiting for us.

Let's look at each of seekers and see what they can teach us about reaching out to the seekers of our time. Mary Magdalene is drawn by a love that is tender. It is down to earth, physical, flesh and blood. She wishes to care for the body of her beloved Lord. She surely stands for all those whose lives are driven by compassion for the wounded of the world. Mother Teresa, who searched for the body of her Lord on the streets of Kolkata. St Damien of Molokai who gave his life to those suffering from leprosy in Hawaii.

Think also of those millions of people who do not know Christ and yet who are filled with compassion for the suffering. Like Mary Magdalene, they are searching for the bodies of the wounded. The world is filled with weeping. Four days into the last Assembly, Hamas committed those terrible atrocities that plunged the Middle East into war. People are weeping in Ukraine and, yes, in Russia too at the death and mutilation of hundreds of thousands of young people, as they weep too in Sudan and Myanmar. One of the study groups convoked by the Holy Father is called 'Listening to the cry of the poor.' It could be called 'listening to the cry of those who weep.' Mary Magdalene is their patron.

Then Mary hears her name: 'Mary'; 'Rabbuni.' It is fitting that she whose life is driven by compassionate, tender love, should have her emptiness filled with her name. She searched for a dead body, but she found more than she could have dreamt of, the love that is alive for ever. Our God always calls us by name. 'But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine". (Isaiah 43.1)

Her name signifies encounter, the presence of the Lord. The first thing that happens at baptism is the request for a name. 'What is your name?' or 'What name do you give your child?' The name is not just a label slapped on children to distinguish them from each other: That would make me Child no 4. Our name is a sign that we are treasured by God in our uniqueness.

Pope Francis contrasted the way that the Roman Emperor saw the world, though a census counting numbers with our God: 'Dear brother, dear sister, to God, who changed history in the course of a census, you are not a number, but a face. ...Christ does not look at numbers, but at faces'.

And so our mission too is to name the God who looks for us in the dark. And to treasure each other's name and faces too. We shall only mediate God's presence if we are present to each other in this Synod. Gregory Boyle SJ works with young gang members in Los Angeles. The secret of his ministry is to know their names. Not just their official names or their nicknames, but the names that their mothers call them when they are not angry. When he calls young Lula by his name, 'you would have thought that I had electrocuted him. His whole body spasms

⁴ Paul MURRAY OP, "Dominicans and the Key of Knowledge", A Talk to Dominican Friars Studying in Rome - PUST, Angelicum, 19 February 2023.

with delight to be known, to be called, to hear his name uttered out loud. For his entire trip through the crosswalk, Lula kept turning back and looking at me, smiling.⁵

Tyrannical regimes erase names and faces. In Auschwitz Saint Maximilian Kolbe became prisoner 16,670. The President of Russia has always refused to name the man who bravely opposed him, Alexie Navalny. He was just 'a certain person'. Similarly, Nelson Mandela became the face of opposition to the apartheid regime. And so when he was imprisoned, it was prohibited to publish an image of his face. It was erased from the public memory. So when after decades in prison, he was allowed to walk on the beach, no one knew him. His face had been robbed of its power.

This synod will be a moment of grace if we look at each other with compassion, and see people who are like us, searching. Not representatives of parties in the Church, that horrible conservative Cardinal, that frightening feminist! But fellow searchers, who are wounded yet joyful. I must confess that I am terrible at remembering names, partly it is because I am deaf. That is my excuse. Forgive me!

But Mary Magdalene's tender love needs healing. Jesus commands her: 'Do not cling to me.' Scholars have given some absurd explanations for this, the most implausible being that that Jesus' wounds were still sore! He is saying she cannot take private possession of him. His presence to her is not hers to own. The Resurrection is the birth of his community. 'The People of God is never simply the sum of the baptised; rather, it is the 'we' of the Church' (I.L. 3). 'But go to my brothers and say to them: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" This is the first time in John's gospel that he calls the disciples 'brothers'. *Fratelli Tutti!* She must liberate her love from all exclusivity! Then she will be ready to preach the good news to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord.' This is our challenge too. Not to cling to my English Jesus or my Dominican Jesus, but the Lord in whom we are all brothers and sisters, even the Jesuits! This synod will be fruitful if we learn to say 'we.' 'My Father and your Father, my God and your God.'

Then there is the disciple whom the Lord loved. He too has his way of loving and his emptiness, the extinction of the light of his life. He lets old Peter, puffing and panting, go in first into the dark tomb but he sees the empty space between the angels and he believes. This is the love which gives sight. *Ubi amor, ibi oculus* (Richard of St Victor). Where there is love there is sight. He sees with the eyes of love and so sees love's victory. His gospel is that of the eagle, whose eyes were believed to look straight into the light of the sun and not be blinded. His search is supremely theological.

I spent two weeks this year in the *Ecole Biblique* in Jerusalem. The brethren live in the shadow of death, forty minutes from Gaza. They remain there, studying the Word of God, teaching and praying. They remain as a sign that 'the light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.' (John 1.5). Mary Magdalene's emptiness is healed by the calling of a name – presence - and his by the light which shines in an empty tomb. So he embodies all those who seek to understand the meaning of our lives, the God-shaped void in our hearts, as Blaise Pascal said. Christian thinkers of course, but also everyone who struggles to find light in the darkness of our suffering: the poets and the artists and film makers who refuse to believe that darkness has the victory. For our preaching of the resurrection, we need them, open to their wisdom, as St Thomas Aquinas was to the pagan Aristotle. Aquinas wrote that all 'truth no matter by whom it is said, is from the Holy Spirit (*omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, est a Spiritu Sancto*).'⁶

Then there is Simon Peter. His emptiness is the heaviest of all, the burden of failure. He denied his friend. Surely he longs for those healing words which will be spoken at last on the beach.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁶ S T, I II, q.109, a.1, ad 1.

So our pastoral mission too is to be with all those who are burdened by failure and sin and share the forgiveness we have received, our own discovery of the amazing grace of the one who 'saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I am found, was blind but now I see.' Our mission is to name the merciful one whom we too need, like Peter.

So in this first resurrection scene we see how the Lord responds to three forms of searching corresponding to three voids in our lives: tender love which searches for presence; the search for meaning and light and for forgiveness. Each searcher needs the other. Without Mary, they would not have come to the tomb. She declares that the Lord is present. Without the Beloved Disciple, they would not understand the emptiness of the tomb as Resurrection; without Peter, they would not have understood that Resurrection is the triumph of mercy.

Each represents a group that felt in some way excluded at the last Assembly. Mary Magdalene also reminds us of how women are often excluded from formal positions of authority in the Church. How are we to find a way forward, which justice and our faith demand? Their search is ours. At the last Assembly many theologians also felt marginal. Some wondered why they had bothered to come. We cannot get anywhere without them. And the group that was most resistant to the Synodal path was the pastors, the parish priests who especially share Peter's role as shepherds of mercy. The Church cannot become truly Synodal without them too.

When nearly everyone feels that *they* are the excluded ones, there should be no competition for victimhood! The search in the dark for the Lord needs all of these witnesses, as the Synod needs all of the ways in we love and search for the Lord, as we need the seekers of our time, even if they do not share our faith.

How is this to overflow into mission? These words are attributed to Antoine de St Exupery. They are even better than what he actually wrote: 'If you wish to construct a boat, do not gather your men and women to give them orders, or to explain each detail of what they must do or where to find everything....If you want to construct a boat, give birth in the hearts of your men and women the desire for the sea.⁷!' Give people a taste of the infinite, and they will find their own ways to make boats and set off into the vast ocean.

Each of these witnesses is touched by a love which is infinite. Mary Magdalene is touched by an infinite tenderness; The Beloved Disciple is moved by the search for boundless meaning; Peter, by the need for the mercy which is without limits, forgiving not seven times but seventy times seven times. If we open ourselves to each other's infinite yearning, we shall launch the boat of mission. Only together shall we, in the words of Ephesians, 'have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.' (3.18,19).

This afternoon we shall find the disciples once again in the dark, in the locked room.

⁷ "To create a ship is not to weave sails, forge nails or read the stars, but to give a taste of the sea, which is one, and in the light of which nothing is contradictory but community in love." (A. SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *Citadelle*, Gallimard, Paris, 1959, p. 687, trans. ours).