

Rev Rex A E Hunt. *MSc(Hons)*
Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
Kirribilli
28 March 2021

EASTER: CROSS, DEATH, TOMB, BUNNIES... WHAT THE HECK!

When some initial planning was being done for suggested speakers and themes for Spirit of Life, my name came up as one who could be considered to speak on Easter.

I accepted the invitation. Thank you for the trust shown to me.
But my initial thinking was to offer something
just a bit different in structure.

Instead of an Address based on challenging doctrines and creeds with theological argument, I have chosen to present six short ‘thought cameos’
but still with much help from scholarly friends around the world.

I am sure the more literalist and conservative professionals ‘out there’ will consider the cameos inadequate, perhaps even heretical.

Likewise, such an attempt as this in a so-called ‘secular’ society is fraught with danger.
Or worse, irrelevance!

Never-the-less I offer them with the not so cheeky invitation that you may just wish to ponder them some more, sometime.

oo0oo

Cameo One

Some years ago, an American pop diva called Madonna, set the religious world—Anglican, Vatican, fundamentalist—alight with a remarkable religious display on stage.¹

Called the *Confessions Tour*, at one point during her performance, Madonna emerged “...on a mammoth disco crucifix wearing a crown of thorns to perform the song ‘Live to Tell’. Suspended on the giant cross encrusted with Swarovski crystals, she devoted her song to African victims of AIDS.”

When I read the story of this event it was published in a progressive theological book under the heading **The Blasphemy of Art**.

Expanding on this heading the author’s comments continued:

“Artists have understood—long before and better than theologians—that the crucified one has entered into the global domain. The memory of the death of Jesus has long since leaked out of the ecclesial ghettos.

”Artists have intuited that crucifixion was a primary metaphor. It signified the dominating power of the Empire; an unspoken threat to those who would dare to rise

¹ Dewey, *Passion*, 6-8

up. The history of Western Art attests to the creative remembering of the death of Jesus.”

Cameo Two

Good Friday. The day tradition says Jesus—a peasant artisan—was killed.

“The Roman executioners employed their most vicious means to eradicate a peasant artisan. Crucifixion meant not simply death; it deleted victims from society’s memory...”²

Despite what appears to be a longstanding preoccupation with the death of Jesus, especially with images of a crucifix, the earliest images of the cross only date back to the fourth and fifth centuries.

Prior to this time the dominate images show Jesus as a healer and wise teacher or sage.

When the cross is imaged, such iconography symbolises resurrection, the tree of life, paradise in this world, and the transfiguration of the world by the Spirit.

“These crosses are not about sacrifice or debt repayment.”³

Progressive christianity’s challenge to traditional theology...

The death and life of the sage Jesus is a story of resistance to the Roman Empire, not a story of how the Empire enacted God's will.

“Atonement theology [since 1098 CE - Archbishop Anselm] says, 'Jesus died so we might live.' It suggests that the torture and murder lamented this Friday is ‘good’. Christians who ground their power in divine love mourn on Friday, keep vigil until dawn on Sunday, and say with joy, ‘Jesus lived so that all creation might live’.”⁴

But this jarring observation:

“To those outside the circles of the fledging Jesus movement, the death of a peasant artisan was hardly significant.”⁵

Cameo Three

Any investigation of the so-called primary evidence, called the Christian Gospels,⁶ shows there is very little commentary.

And what commentary there is, is very brief.

Mark: Eight verses

Matthew: 20 verses

Luke: 53 verses

John: 56 verses

Within these stories there are at least three developments in the way

² Dewey, **Passion** 1

³ Brock, “*Cross*”, 2

⁴ Brock, “*Cross*”, 2

⁵ Dewey, **Passion**,15

⁶ Another collection called the Sayings Gospel (Q) “knows of Jesus’ death by crucifixion but has no passion account and does not understand his death as salvific” (Dewey, **Passion**, 188)

the early followers interpreted the death of Jesus.

- (i) as victim of Roman power,
- (ii) as martyr for the Empire of God, and
- (iii) as sacrifice that bound together a new community

Biblical scholar Stephen Patterson writes:

“I have become convinced that in each of these ways of interpreting Jesus’ death, the followers of Jesus were in fact drawing attention to his life. *His death mattered to them because his life mattered to them.*”⁷ (My emphasis)

Over a period of nearly 60 years the several early Christianities shaped and reshaped their belief in Easter.

From the barest, unembellished proclamation of Jesus ‘exaltation’ to glory, with no mention of ‘resurrection’...

To the quite elaborate accounts of what the ‘risen’ Jesus did, hour by hour, on the first Easter Sunday....

As noted by others, such scripts or texts are not fixed or innocent reports.

Each succeeding generation has added layers upon layers resulting in a ‘moving’ tradition.

It’s the more elaborate accounts now being the current ‘traditional’ story of Easter that many are accustomed to hear presented.

Cameo Four

Mention the word ‘resurrection’ and chances are some will include the name ‘Jesus’.

Even, that it was a special ‘supernatural’ (hear ‘unbelievable’) event, or something like that.

Sadly, this is the result of a literalist interpretation.

A favourite with certain branches of Christianity here in Sydney, as well as Mel Gibson and his film *The Passion of The Christ* (2004).

So, following the advice of a New Testament scholar

“excise from your imagination all of the [traditional] Christian art you have seen about the resurrection... Thomas thrusting his hand into the side of Jesus, or the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus with Jesus, or Mary being told not to cling to Jesus. Then forget all the sermons you have heard at Easter.”⁸

Mmm.

Of all the ‘resurrection’ biblical stories several early metaphors are used:

raised up/stand up, taken up, has been seen, exalted.

‘Raised up’ is the dominate metaphor and may have been the first.

Each is trying to find the appropriate language for an experience.

None carry within their given meanings

‘salvation from sin’, ‘immortality of the soul’, or the ‘resuscitation of a corpse’.

Resurrection? Again, I am helped by some comments by others...

⁷ Patterson, **Beyond**, 127

⁸ Scott, “*Introduction*”, 1

“The resurrection is not a fact to be believed, but an experience to be shared... [It] is not a contract for a time-share apartment in heaven. It is the spirit of Jesus present in people who continue his struggle against domination in all its forms, here, now, on this good earth.” (*Walter Wink 1994: LookSmart web site*)

Likewise this gutsy quote from an American colleague... um, in one of her sermons!

“Jesus was not resurrected so he could hold his disciples’ hands. Resurrection is not a sentimental Easter card. Its’ a profound revolution and revelation...”

(*Elizabeth Braddon/PSUMC-Website*)

The trouble with resurrection is that the church has
literalised it, narrowed and constricted it,
enshrined it in fossilised creeds and the heavy-handed tradition of sin, guilt and forgiveness,
“and in the process, not only forfeited its great claim and hope”⁹
but in reality, is trying to kill Jesus all over again.

The Easter stories need to be taken seriously, not literally.

With a real concern for Jesus’ life and what he said or did or stood for.

Jesus is not your boyfriend or personal saviour or white supremacist.

Jesus offered a picture “of an alternative way to experience life... through
common experiences.”¹⁰

Jesus needs saving from the church.

Cameo Five

Easter, a ‘moon’ spring festival, is the most important festival in the Christian church.

It’s bedrock stuff!

It’s more ancient and regarded as more important
than the ‘sun’ mid-winter festival ‘Nativity’,
or as we call it, ‘Christmas’.

But Easter in Australia occurs during autumn, not spring.

So, as with the other major Christian festivals shape by a northern hemisphere imagery,
there is a ritual discomfort when they are simply imported wholesale.

In the southern hemisphere we cannot exploit the theme of spring’s *new life*.

So perhaps the theme of *refreshing coolness* could be an excellent substitute
to enrich our appreciation of the Easter event.

April in Australia is a pleasant, refreshing month.

Its arrival brings a sense of relief from the thick blanket of summer
as we are rejuvenated by a touch of autumn coolness...

As none other than Geoffrey Usher wrote in *A Southern Chalice*

“Summer is over; the weather is cooler; the leaves are losing their lush greenness and
changing colour. We can rejoice in the glorious colours of autumn: the yellow, gold,

⁹ Scott, **Trouble**, 243

¹⁰ Galston, **Human**, 114

orange, brown, russet and red of different trees as their leaves wither, fall and carpet the ground, heralding the approach of winter, the season of death”.

Easter Day signifies the end of the 40 days of Lent, when traditional Christians (who had given up something during Lent, often food, such as eggs), can indulge themselves again. Especially chocolate eggs!

In Australia the days Good Friday through to Easter Monday/Tuesday are public holidays. So if you can combine the public holidays with some days of annual leave, and a second weekend, you can almost double time away from work or home!

Much general debate surrounds the name ‘Easter’. Such debate claims the name Easter is derived from 'Ostara' or 'Eostre', a pagan goddess of fertility, whose feast was celebrated on the Vernal Equinox.

In Old Saxon culture, the Hare was sacred to Ostara and the modern tradition of the Easter Bunny appears a distant echo of that.

In most languages other than English and German, the festival's name is derived from ‘Pesach,’ the Hebrew name of ‘Passover’ a Jewish festival to which the Christian Easter is linked.

Cameo Six

A poem by the late German liberation theologian, Dorothee Soelle (1929-2003). She grew up under Hitler’s state terror:

“Every day I am afraid that he died in vain
because he is buried in our churches,
because we have betrayed his revolution
in our obedience to authority and our fear of it.

“I believe in Jesus Christ who rises
again and again in our lives so that
we will be free from prejudice and arrogance,
from fear and hate and carry on his revolution
and make way for his kingdom”.

Christianity... Easter... the sage Jesus...

“is not defended by fudging the facts, nor is it advanced by sleight-of-hand exegesis.
And God is not served by telling lies on his behalf”.¹¹

oo0oo

Jesus. Born of a woman and the Hebrew gene pool...

I remember a man who had dreams of what might be...

¹¹ Sheehan, “*Resurrection*”, 104

I remember a man driven by his dreams...

I remember a man enthused by his successes...

I remember a man driven by his convictions...

I remember a man whose faith in all he believed was tested to the limits...

I remember someone human like all of us...

(Michael Morwood 2003)

Bibliography

Borg, M. J. **Speaking Christian. Why Christian Words have Lost their Meaning and Power - and How they can be Restored.** New York. Harper One, 2011

Brock, R. N. "*The Question of the Cross in 'Good' Friday*". **The Huffington Post**, 3 April 2010.

Dewey, A.J. **Inventing the Passion: How the Death of Jesus was Remembered.** Salem. Polebridge Press, 2017

Galston, D. **God's Human Future. The Struggle to Define Theology Today.** Salem. Polebridge Press, 2016

Marxsen, W. **The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.** (Translated by Margaret Kohl.) Philadelphia. Fortress Press, 1970

Morwood, M. **Praying a New Story.** Melbourne. Spectrum Publications, 2003

Patterson, S. **Beyond the Passion. Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus.** Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004

Scott, B. B. **The Trouble with Resurrection. From Paul to the Fourth Gospel.** Salem. Polebridge Press, 2010

Scott, B. B. "*Introduction*" in B. B. Scott (ed). **The Resurrection of Jesus. A Sourcebook.** Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press, 2008

Sheenan, T. "*The Resurrection, an Obstacle to Faith?*" in B. B. Scott (ed). **The Resurrection of Jesus. A Sourcebook.** Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press, 2008

Soelle, D. **Revolutionary Patience.** Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1977

Usher, G. "*Easter Prayer*" in A. Usher (ed). **A Southern Chalice. An Anthology of Readings and Songs.** Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association, 2013