

Good Friday
29/3/2024

Mark the Evangelist

Philippians 2:1-11
Luke 9:44-48, 51-56

The cross and the unbearable lightness of being

If we do not keep hold of the crucifixion, Easter Day becomes mere kitsch which has nothing to say to this broken world.

It is forty years since the appearance of Milan Kundera's novel, *The unbearable lightness of being*. The book is the account of four lives set against the background of the 1968 Soviet suppression of the Czech Spring, although Kundera is less interested in this historical context than in the fact that his protagonists must live *somewhere*. How can we live in our particular Where? Should we fight for life or do we flee from it?

Kundera begins by asking about the "weight" our actions have, and whether it is better that they be heavy or light. Two possibilities present themselves. First, our actions gain substance by means of eternal return (after Nietzsche): weight and meaning arise from repetition in recurrence or constancy; this is the struggle for life, and holding it tight. The second possibility is that our actions can only be "light", fleeting, once-and-never-again events which are then lost with the oblivion tomorrow ultimately brings. Kundera proposes that the lightness of our being is that it will soon be as if we and all we love never existed; the unbearability of this is that we must still exist in relation to each other, nonetheless.

The idea of an unbearable lightness has increasingly coloured my reflections on Easter and the thinking any Christian must do around the confession of Jesus' resurrection. Is there not, for the sceptical but also for believers who are paying attention, an "unbearable lightness" about how Easter is often celebrated and proclaimed? This is not quite Kundera's unbearable lightness but relates more closely to another concept in his book: "kitsch". Kitsch is representation which hollows out the substance of the thing represented. Easter is susceptible to kitschification, to the extent that promises of resurrection locate our most authentic existence in a future world beyond this one. Kitschy Easter proclamation leaves this world behind. Whatever such a future might be, it tells us little about how to be in our fractured present.

Against this too familiar reading of Easter, the resurrection might better be taken to point *backwards* rather than forwards. That is, the true miracle of Easter is Jesus' life up to and including the crucifixion. The path to the cross is the true miracle because the real shock in the Easter story is *not* that the dead might one day live again. It is rather that there are worse things than being crucified.

This is perhaps a little surprising, given the horror of death by crucifixion. Yet the lightness of the crucifixion here is not *What* it entailed but *That* it happened, despite the *What*. Contrary to atonement theories which require Jesus to be spent as some kind of salvific coin, dying as he did was not necessary but was the *indirect* consequence of a decision to *live* in radical openness to human (and divine) truth, undeterred by the potential lethal cost of such a life in a truth-denying world. Jesus came to live, not to die. On this reading, "worse than being crucified" seems to be, for Jesus, a life without openness God's truth and its claim on our relationships with each other. When, then, as in our Gospel text this morning, Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem", it is with an

openness to this living future in this world, and not with a commitment to escaping the world through the cross into an easier eternity.

This resonates on one level with Kundera's interest in lightness of being. Not motivated by the desire to establish weighty institutional legacies or even simply to survive as long as he can, Jesus enacts an openness to truth and a fearlessness in the face of the horrific death which looms because of that freedom. Life is more than surviving. But for Kundera's protagonist Sabina, who seems to represent what he himself holds to be true, the fleeting nature of our existence translates to life as *flight*; lightness is finally freedom from the entanglements of relational commitment and responsibility. Sabina's truth is finally *detachment* – from others and so from meaning. Such a life has its own harsh authenticity, but it is finally as lonely as the sheer eternity of Easter kitsch is empty.

In contrast, while Jesus lived with a Sabrina-like lightness of being which did not fight for grandeur or survival, neither was his life flight from others into lonely solipsism or by escape to heaven. Precisely the opposite: as Paul described in our reading from Philippians this morning, Jesus takes the form not of a fleeing survivor but of a servant. This is a radical being for others which neither betrays nor abandons them. If it is such a one who is resurrected, so also is resurrected the possibility of a life that neither fights nor flees but proclaims and lives into an uncomfortable one-and-all social and political tension which could lead to a cross. An Easter resurrection which recalls the cross does not promise time with God someplace else; it promises the presence of God here and now in any life lived in openness to bearing the “unbearable” other.

The cross arises from a social and political ethic which does not destroy and does not abandon, and it is just this ethic which is raised on Easter Day, and not merely the individual Jesus, understood to have died a few days earlier. The heaven of Easter day is the heaven which led to Jesus being crucified.

This matters today because – contrary to the gospel of the risen *crucified* one – the struggles which wrack this world are precisely struggles for some heaven or another, each conceived as an eternity *without* the requirement that we bear this or that particular human other. Someone is always missing from our preferred heavens. And so those various eternities become visions for which we can justifiably crush and kill or abandon the other who won't be in our heaven anyway: we want a heaven with no Israel to live with, or no Palestine; a heaven with no gays, or no fascists; with no difficult bodies but only easy souls; with no tangled histories but only tidy logic; a heaven with no appalling chauvinists or uppity feminists; no traffic, no stop lights, no waiting; we want a heaven with no differences to overcome and so, what all this could only finally mean: a heaven *with no one else there*. The heaven proposed by crossless Easter kitsch – and by every fight or flee social or political program – is finally an unbearably lonely eternity.

We need a better heaven than this. That better heaven will have something to do with a resurrected cross. An Easter which does not forget the cross speaks of the miracle we need: the revelation that our life with each other *is* bearable, and is not merely bearable but is the possibility of a joy worth dying for, though not killing for.

In our Lenten Studies text this year, Sam Wells writes that the kind of reconciliation we see in Jesus – *and so salvation he brings* – is one which “[holds] together profound but incompatible loyalties, [straddles] deep but rival relationships, [is] the battleground for terrible and uncontrollable enmities”. The proclamation of Easter cannot exceed this, for this is the nature of the one who is said to be risen, and this is what that risen one *continues* to do. The risen *crucified* one spans our incompatibility with each other, our rivalries, our enmities.

To return then to the question of Kundera's book, "How should we live in our particular Where?" What has the Easter of the Crucified to say to this? Our life is to reflect not other-worldly Easter kitsch. It is to reflect God's being with us in the midst of our fractured here and now.

We are to live with the understanding that this is the *only* place given to us to live, with these people and no others.

We are to recognise that life's promise will *only* be realised in the form the other human being.

And we are to learn to bear the cross-shaped burden we can each sometimes be to each other, for their sake and so for our own.

This is the reconciliation, salvation and call of the Easter of the crucified Jesus.
