

Psalm 118
John 20:19-31
John 21:15-19

The scratch and dent God

Gearing for hearing

I've mentioned before that I've set myself the goal of slowly working through the book, "[1001 movies you must see before you die](#)" – an exercise pitting cultural breadth against personal longevity.

One of the films I've recently seen from the list is the 1972 Academy Award winner for best film, actor and director (among other things): [The French Connection](#). Some of you probably saw this when it first came out. For my part, it wasn't a good film for a six-year-old. *The French Connection* is a gritty police drama treating the rise of the drug trade – in this case, out of [Turkey through France](#) into New York. It's still well worth watching if crime dramas are your thing.

But I mention it because I had previously seen another movie on the same drug trade but set on the other side of the Atlantic: the 2014 French film [La French](#), for which the English title was *The Connection*. You can see the connection!

The French film is also worth watching, but something which struck me about the two had nothing to do with the stories themselves, but a feature of the timing of the storytelling in each case. The 1971 film was shot in 1971 and told the story of things happening in 1971. This meant that, once the drama moved onto the streets, we saw a 1971 New York street just as anyone would have seen it as they left a New York cinema after watching the film during its first release.

The French film, however, tells the story of 1970s Marseille from some 40 years later. And so everything must be reconstructed to translate the viewer back to the 70s. They do a pretty good job. But the thing which struck me was the cars. While the production assistants of the 2014 film had done a marvellous job finding all sorts of 1950s, 60s and 70s French cars to stretch along the roads in the street scenes, every car is straight and shiny. The problem here is that only dedicated collectors keep old cars. And they don't keep them "old" – they fix them up like new. Every second car lining the street in the 1971 version of the story is dented, rusted and muddy. Every car in the 2014 version of the story looks like it just rolled out of the showroom. The collector doesn't want the dents; she wants the "real" car – the car before anything happened to it.

This might really spoil your enjoyment of new movies about old things because it happens everywhere. New movies featuring old streets seem always only to have new (old) cars. There's no place movie makers can go to find a car that sits between the painstakingly restored classic and the rusted out, utterly unroadworthy equivalent languishing in some farm shed.

But at this point, I'm more interested in the collector than the movie maker. The collector identifies the real thing as that which is as close as possible to its original condition. Something is of greatest value when it is closest to what it was in the beginning. A mint-condition coin is worth more than one that has been spent, and collectable toys are worth more if the box has not been opened.

In all of this, it seems that the wear and tear we call life is a process of diminishment. At least, this seems to be the case with “things”: tools, clothes, toys, cars.

And what about people? If we ourselves were collectable, as dolls or stamps and Lego sets are, what would constitute the *ideal* of a person – the ideal of any one of us? What does the “collector” edition of a John, a Sue or a David look like?

It’s a stupid question, of course. But it goes to what we think we are, and so what is of value about us, and when we are *most* this valuable thing.

This brings us, finally, to our readings for today – two texts from John’s Gospel, from the resurrection narratives. In one, Thomas makes a statement about what he thinks the real Jesus – a resurrected Jesus – would look like. In the other, Jesus reminds Peter what his – Peter’s – reality is. Listen for how the scratches and the dents are handled.

(→John 20. 19-31
and John 21. 15-19)

Extending the hearing

Most of us know those texts pretty well and so know also how they are typically interpreted. Thomas is the apparent sceptic who won’t believe unless he can see and touch; Jesus interrogates Peter three times, seemingly to drive home Peter’s earlier three-fold denial that he knows, loves, Jesus.

But there’s more to be found here. Thomas finally declares that Jesus is “Lord and God” when Jesus’ wounds are revealed, but it is precisely the scratched and dented Jesus who is praised there. The marks of the crucifixion are not marks like the colour of Jesus’s eyes or the shape of his nose. The marks are not the *means* by which Jesus is identified; they *are* his identity. The real Jesus is not the perfect “no crying he makes” baby in a manger, before he says or does anything, or before anything is done to him. The real Jesus is the “used” one: dusty, dented and discarded. What is raised is not a fully restored, just-rolled-out-of-the-showroom Jesus. The scratches and the dents are not “on” him; they are him. It is not Jesus, the confessing Thomas says, if he’s not marked with the marks of the crucifixion.

And as it is for Jesus, so also for us. In Peter’s exchange with Jesus, the great disciple learns this for himself. Our few verses today began mid-story, but the narrative commenced with Peter declaring, “I’m going fishing”: a return to Galilee, a return to the beginning. It’s as if nothing has happened, and Peter and the rest of the disciples have hit the reset: forget and begin again. And then Jesus appears, as if to affirm the re-fresh.

But, in what we heard today, Jesus draws the enthusiastic showroom-restored Peter to one side. And with his repeated question, Jesus presses Peter to acknowledge his own brokenness. There is no mere forgiveness here, in the forgive-and-forget mode. It is as the one who three times denied Jesus that Peter is installed as the shepherd to Jesus’ lambs.

This is one of our “know-ing” texts, which we considered last week. Lord, Peter says, You know everything; you know that I love you. But by the third posing of the question, Peter’s statement of his love is deepened, because with that third question from Jesus, two things happen.

First, Peter’s failure is revealed to him again – Jesus “knows everything”; Jesus knows that Peter has failed him in his threefold denial.

And yet, second, the Jesus who knows of Peter’s failure is also the one who now appoints him as pastor: feed my sheep. Peter says three times, “Lord, you know that I love you”, but the third is different from the previous two, because the Jesus who is

loved has now changed in Peter's perception. This is no longer the Jesus the enthusiastic Peter wants him to be. This is the Jesus who knows the dinged-up, broken-down Peter and loves him nonetheless, just as he is. And more than loves him, Jesus commissions him to continue Jesus' own work.

And so the collection-edition Peter is not the strong, vital fisherman at the start of the gospel, is not the confident, sometimes over-reaching disciple mid-story, is not the fearful one at the end. The collector-edition Peter – the truly valuable Peter – is the one who – at each stage, in every condition – has been loved. Peter's value doesn't change with his changing behaviour and fortunes in the story. At his best and his worst, and despite his own attempt to go back to BNIB, what has mattered most is that he has been *valued*. We are not our best selves at any *stage* of life, but *in* life, in flight.

What does the collector's edition *you* look like?

You are each, here and now, the best you've ever been. Now are your glory days, now matters as much as any other moment you imagined was more "you".

And so this can have nothing to do with how you *feel* about yourself. God help us if we were worth only as much as we think we are. And God does help us here, because this is a scratch-and-dent God. Our here and now is our best time because, at *each* stage of his life, Jesus was the presence of God: in the heady days of the calling the first disciples and in the glory of a resurrection from the dead, *but also* when struggling with the powers and nailed to a cross. The crucified Christ is not the one who *will* be risen, but the one who *is* risen; the risen Christ is not the one who *was* crucified, but the one who *is* crucified. This is the point of Thomas' insistence on the marks of the crucifixion. The marks are not "on" Jesus, but *are* him. It's as if everything which Jesus does and everything which happens to him is *coincident*: it all occurs at once, in the sight of God, and each is as valuable, each is as much the true Jesus, as the other.

The gospel is that, as with Jesus, so also with us. All that we do and is done to us coheres in God. There is no better you than the you sitting here and now because your here and now is wrapped up in the God who draws near to us in all things and binds them together, to make all things God's own.

Understand, then, as Thomas understood, and step up, as Jesus called Peter to do so. Because if, in all things – in our very best and our very worst – we are already seen and loved, then we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.
