

Trauma and the significance of the tomb

The body of Jesus, laid in the tomb, was one that was broken and blood stained. A body that had known much of what it was to be rejected and reviled when alive. The body of Jesus, laid by Joseph of Arimathea in the tomb, had been a human body of flesh and bone like every other, and like every other, that body had known what it was to be fully human, known what it was to experience life in all its fullness – its joys and its sorrows. The body of Jesus, born in a manger and cared for by loving but young and inexperienced parents who were to become homeless and exiled into a foreign land. The body of Jesus that had grown through childhood and adolescence into adulthood – knowing what it was to have to learn by error – know what it was to have to make difficult and even sometimes painful decisions. It was that body that Mary Magdalene and the disciples expected to remain in the tomb. Surprised at the stone being rolled away and that, by now, decaying body having been removed, and amidst Mary Magdalene's distress at the grave having been desecrated, Mary still expected the damaged, physical body of Jesus to be found lying somewhere – wherever 'they' whoever 'they' were, Jewish or Roman authorities of one kind or another or others perhaps, with different religious or political affiliations, had put the body of Jesus. Mary Magdalene's anguish is a symptom of her not understanding the significance of the tomb. In her traumatised state Mary Magdalene cannot think beyond the immediate.

Part of the quite natural response to trauma in the human experience is to block out the significance of a particular effect. This is perhaps more commonly evidenced by the death of a loved one where the immediate impact results in an emotional numbness. Things carry on as if normal, the traumatised individual responding in a robotic fashion to life going on around them, disconnected from reality – struggling psychologically to come to terms with loss and change – hurting within the deep recesses of the mind – physically unable to eat or perhaps struggling to stop eating. Mind and body of the bereaved languishing in the darkness of the abys – tomb like.

Our Lord's broken body empathises with the broken spirit of humanity. The body brutalised, and disfigured by crucifixion, embodies for all of us the pain of the human condition in its everyday struggle to flourish. And, perhaps more importantly, it identifies with humanity in its sometimes violent inability to respect God-given life in others who are different from ourselves. In all of these moments, the tomb – the dark place of death and endings – has an important place to play in rejuvenating life - at that point when the only expectation is abandonment and hopelessness.

Slowly, over time – often after a long struggle in a naturally quite depressed state, deep within the tomb - the bereaved comes to terms with life shattering loss – emerging, still standing, changed – re-engaging with life that is different – life that can never go back to how it was – yet, for most of us at any rate, with a capacity to continue to give and to have some semblance of meaning and purpose. In all of this, the necessary withdrawal into the tomb-like place, in the deepest recesses of the mind – and despite all that you might expect, in the darkest of places – healing and transformation takes place.

The broken and twisted body of Jesus – is renewed and made new in that same place where Mary Magdalene sees only emptiness and hopelessness.

The best churches are tomb-like places. Despite what you might think when you step into a sacred place adorned with colourful stained glass and other such works of art and music and architecture saturated with hundreds of years of history – The best churches emphasise and offer a big empty space in which people of all kinds are able to bring their battered and tired bodies, their distressed and traumatised psyches and gently and quietly lay them to rest, sheltering as it were, in the darkness, and in resting, to identify with the crucified form of God himself. In this tomb – slowly the stone is enabled to roll away, life is re-engaged – changed for sure – but with a new voice quietly articulating the Alleluia of the Easter faith.

As you leave church this morning – as you re-emerge into the world from whence you came – go on your way from this place knowing that your story is linked to the story of others – linked in its struggles and its joys, linked to others by the pain and sense of loss, as well as by the ambitions and hopes that you hold within you. And know in your heart by faith that you can return to this tomb anytime of night or day to rest with God who loves you.

You, who in Christ, share in His gift of resurrection.

Rev. Mark Bailey

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