

Shame, Redemption, and the Terror of Resurrection

A sermon on John 20:19-31 & 1 John 1:1 - 2.2 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 April 2018

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Message

When we expected to be shamed as we have shamed others, we are shocked and saved by the unexpected mercy of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Sermon

Last Sunday night I visited another church, and in the sermon the preacher gave a little potted summary of the gospel as he understood it. Despite reminding us several times that it was Easter Sunday and that we were celebrating the resurrection, his summary actually had no need of the resurrection. In his mind, our forgiveness and salvation were all achieved by the death of Jesus which supposedly satisfied God's justice. His summary only mentioned the resurrection as a kind of "wait, there's more."

Now, even leaving aside the obvious ugliness of that picture of God, the glaring problem with this view is that the unique thing about the Jesus story is not his death, but his resurrection. Human history is littered with cruel deaths and the executions of innocent scapegoats, and crucifixions were pretty much a daily occurrence in trouble spots in the Roman empire. The death of Jesus was just one more.

It was the resurrection that was so out of the ordinary, and it was more than just an afterthought to make sure we noticed something important about his death. The resurrection is the place where we encounter the earth-shattering forgiveness that is the heart of the gospel, the good news. It is when Jesus steps among us and reaches out to us with his wounded hands and says "Peace be with you" that we are saved.

I am going to explain that statement further, but I want to come back to it via a major detour through some recent news stories. Questions of guilt and condemnation and shame and forgiveness and possible redemption and comebacks have been front page news a fair bit recently, and I think that reflecting on some of those stories can help us ground our understanding of God's forgiveness in real life experience.

Some of the stories have come from national politics. We've seen the very public condemnation and shaming of Barnaby Joyce. We continue to see Tony Abbott pumping up the possibility of a resurrection of his own leadership despite the fact that almost nobody seems to believe that he has faced up to his sins or shown any redemptive change since he lost it. There's even been speculation about the possibility of Peter Costello making a comeback. There are plenty of stories there, but we Australians don't really relate to our politicians. We tend to think that they are not like us at all, and so their stories probably won't help us understand our own stories much.

The story about the Australian cricket team is another matter though. If you've been living under a rock and missed it, the story is that two and a half weeks ago, the Australian cricket team's captain and vice-captain and one other player were caught attempting to cheat in a Test match against South Africa. It unleashed a wave of revulsion in the Australian sports-loving public, and we were immediately angrily calling for their heads, and their heads were duly delivered in the form of lengthy bans from the game.

Now this story has been explored in depth from almost every conceivable angle in the media, and I don't really have anything new to add, but I do want to highlight one strand of the discussion that leads us back to the stories we heard tonight about the risen Jesus and his astonishing message of forgiveness. The relevant theme in this cricket story is the interplay between self-righteousness and public shaming, and I think it tells us a lot about ourselves and therefore about the gospel and our need of it.

The particular offence of these players – ball tampering – was sufficiently minor and commonplace that it only received a one match ban from the International Cricket Council, and yet the outrage from the Australian public was so extreme that in order to satisfy them, the Australian Cricket Board imposed, and the players accepted, bans of nine to twelve months from playing, and longer still from leadership.

Why was the public outrage so extreme, and what does it tell us about ourselves? Although cheating and corruption have become commonplace in elite level international sport, including cricket, we Australians have always liked to kid ourselves that we are the exception, that we are above all that. “Tough but fair” has been what we've liked to believe about the approach of the sportspeople who represent *us*.

Our belief that we are better than everyone else is a myth, but myths are very powerful. Myths are the stories that tell us who we are and what we are about. Myths are the storylines of our identity. Whether the original stories are factual or not is not the point. It is the meanings of the myths that matters, and we have a desperate need to believe those meanings to be true.

What these cricketers were really guilty of was shattering our cherished myth and exposing the truth that we Australians are no better than anybody else; that we are just the same as our foreign opponents whose alleged scheming, cheating and whinging we have always looked down our noses at. And that truth is so threatening and so unthinkable that the only way we can cope with it and reestablish our belief in ourselves is to turn on the offenders and shame them savagely as though they are the unexpected and extreme exceptions that prove the rule, the rare rotten apples that stand in shocking contrast to oh-so-righteous *us*. By punishing them twenty times as harshly as the rest of the world would, we try to reconstruct our belief in our own zero tolerance for even the hint of corruption or cheating. They are sacrificed so that our belief in our own righteousness and superiority might be saved.

But, as the Apostle John said in our second reading tonight, “If we maintain that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

There will probably be a public redemption for these cricketers, but the reason for that is not nearly as noble as we'd like to tell ourselves. We would like to believe the myth that it is because they have humbled themselves and hung their heads in shame and admitted their wrongdoing and accepted their just crucifixions, and that we are a uniquely forgiving people who believe in giving everyone a second chance and a fair go. You only have to look at the way we treat asylum seekers and the homeless to see what bullshit that is.

The real reason that we will allow the redemption of these cricketers is that they cooperated with their own public shaming. By hanging their heads and submitting to our judgement of

them as shamefully un-Australian, they allowed us to reclaim the myth of our own superiority, and for that we will in time be more than happy to forgive them.

By contrast, the disgraced football coach James Hird is probably telling us something much more true when he maintains that he is no worse than the rest of us and that his “win, whatever it takes” behaviour was a product of our national sporting culture, not an exception to it. But for confronting us with such unpalatable truths and refusing to submit to our myths and the shaming needed to maintain them, he can never be forgiven.

So how does any of this bring us back to the stories of the crucified and risen Jesus?

Most of what the crucifixion of Jesus tells us is the same as what the crucifixion of the cricketers tells us. When events unmask the comfortable lies that we like to believe about ourselves and expose our sins to the light of truth, we always react by shaming someone who seems to be the most confronting example of our guilt and we sacrifice them to atone for the sins of the rest of us. We’ll sacrifice the cricketers to atone for the exposed failures of our sporting ethics. We’ll sacrifice Harvey Weinstein and Don Burke to atone for the exposed misogyny of contemporary masculinity.

The crucial difference in our crucifixion of Jesus was that it exposed the fact that when we get ourselves into that frenzy of self-righteousness, we can’t even tell who is guilty and who is innocent anymore. We will even shame and crucify the most perfect embodiment of love and goodness that the world has ever seen. And thus, unless we can bury the evidence and seal the tomb tight, everything we desperately don’t want to know about ourselves will be laid bare. Our pretentious claims to be people of truth and light will be shattered by the unmistakable evidence that we have been walking in the darkness and shaming others almost at random.

So any possible resurrection of our crucified victim is actually the most terrifying thing we could ever have imagined. No wonder we asked for armed guards to secure the tomb. We cannot risk letting the truth emerge, for the truth would surely unmask us and utterly destroy us. The payback would surely be worse than the most viral social media shaming of all time. The Jesus who we had given up on when he failed to fulfil our expectations of transforming into a crusading warrior to drive out the foreign powers and vindicate our belief in our national superiority would surely, if he escaped the tomb, turn into that crusading warrior now and drag us through the streets as humiliated captives in punishment for cutting down and dishonouring God’s chosen one.

The most earth-shattering thing about the resurrection stories is not that a dead man was raised back to life, but that he stepped into our midst saying “Peace be with you” rather than “Shame on you”; that he reached out his wounded hands, not to grab us by the throats and exact vengeance, but to warmly embrace us and bless us. This is the experience of utter forgiveness, totally unexpected and incomprehensible.

In him there is not even a shadow of darkness, not even a hint of the cold desire to slowly make us squirm the way we did to Barnaby Joyce, not even a trace of the offended dignity that demands we face a press conference and break down in tears and publicly confess that we failed our whole country and will serve our full sentence before ever daring to imagine any possible redemption. In him there is instead only the unquenchable light of love and the lively mercy that even death could not hold down or diminish. In him there is instead a bursting

affection for us that gathers us up in the exuberant dance of new life and sings with joy over even our most faltering steps.

The crucified and risen Jesus does not come among us and demand that we hang our heads and give a full and detailed confession of our many sins. He does not come and give us a lecture on how thoroughly we have failed and how much it has cost God to forgive us. He does not explain forgiveness as a paid transaction or spell out a doctrine of sacrificial atonement. He doesn't even have to say, "I forgive you." We know that we are forgiven the moment we see him and are swept up in the strength of his unexpected love and mercy. "Peace be with you. You have nothing to fear. Receive the Holy Spirit. Taste my forgiveness and share it with the world."

This is the moment of salvation. This is the moment that we find that our sins are forgiven and we are cleansed from all unrighteousness. This is the moment where life rises from death, not only for Jesus, but for all of us. This is the gospel, the news that is so unbelievably good that it is almost unbearable. This is where we fall to our knees and into life in all its fullness.

And this is the mystery of our redemption that we witnessed last weekend round the baptismal pool and that we are about to encounter again here at this table. For here again at this table tonight, our crucified and risen Lord hosts a feast of love and bids us come, saying "Peace be with you. Be not afraid or ashamed. Eat, drink, feast on my forgiveness, and live!"