

Resurrection Imagination

A sermon on Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7 & Luke 24:36 - 48 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 April 2021

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Message

We mostly don't see ourselves as either terrible sinners or as gloriously Christ-like, but in the resurrection we are called to fully imagine both as world-changing truths.

Sermon

I've stolen my sermon title from last week's sermon by Guilherme Almeida. It wasn't his sermon title, but it was the phrase that has stuck in the imagination and prompted the most thought and conversation among us during the week. So my title tonight is "Resurrection Imagination." Guilherme called us to live out the implications of a resurrection imagination, particularly with regard to our relationship with material possessions, and to seek to bring into reality an otherwise-only-imagined world in which no one is poor.

What I want to do is pick up this idea of the resurrection imagination, and ask what it might be and where it might come from. This is probably not going to be a comfortable sermon to listen to. Drawing on today's Bible readings, I'm going to suggest that a resurrection imagination requires us to believe and come to terms with two really extreme statements about ourselves which, at present, almost none of us really believe at all, at least not personally and deep in our bones.

I'm going to start with the one which comes second, and which is probably easier to hear, if not to believe. It is also the one that is a bit more hidden in our readings. In the section we heard from his first letter, the Apostle John said, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

What we are dealing with here is the essence of our hope, our hope born in the resurrection. The question is whether we can begin to imagine ourselves as the glorious beings that, through the resurrection of Jesus, we are destined to be.

Beloved, we are God's children now, but that's only the start. The full implications of being God's children are already difficult enough to imagine, but that's only the start. What we will eventually be has not yet been revealed. It's actually beyond anything we can imagine. What we do know is this: when Jesus is revealed, when we see him in all his glory, we will be just like him.

Get that? It is a matter of our fundamental identity. You, yes you, will be just like Jesus. Peas in a pod. You Shelley Taylor will be just like Jesus. You Merryl Gahan will be just like Jesus. You Robert Toseland will be just like Jesus. I could go all the way round like we did in our absolutism a few minutes ago. You, all of you, each and every one of you, no exceptions, will be just like Jesus.

The reason John gives for saying that we will be just like Jesus then is interesting. He says that it is because "we will see him as he is." That doesn't immediately sound as important as it is, but it has everything to do with imagination, with resurrection imagination. We can't begin to be what we can't imagine anyone being, but when we see Jesus as he really is, that

imagination will become possible. We will see what we were created to be, what we are called and destined to be.

I said that it is a matter of our fundamental identity. The thing is that we all like to think that our identity is entirely our own personal creation. I am me, uniquely and truly me, and it has got nothing to do with anyone else. But its crap. We're kidding ourselves. However uniquely configured your identity might be, and some of you are pretty unique, that identity is still constructed from things you have observed and learned from others. You are probably a pastiche of bits and pieces of many others rather than a carbon copy of one, but your identity is still made up of things learned from others, some of them consciously and deliberately chosen and taken on, and others that have unconsciously seeped into you and shaped you.

And all of these parts have shaped an identity which is currently the best approximation of the real you that you can yet imagine, but which is nevertheless a second rate fraud compared to the identity you were created and destined for. The problem is not that you have modelled every part of yourself on others. The problem is that the models were comparatively second rate. It is when you truly see Jesus as he really is, that you will see what you can become. In fact, in a surprising and almost bizarre way, when you see Jesus as he really is, you will recognise yourself in him. You will recognise the real you, the true you, the you you were created and destined and have a deep longing to become.

And so the challenge of the resurrection imagination is to begin to grasp who Jesus really is, and to begin to imagine our way into that resurrection identity now. As John goes on to say, "all who have this hope in Jesus purify themselves, just as he is pure." The path to becoming the pure you, the true essence of yourself, is to grasp onto this hope, and to begin to live into now, even though the full picture is yet to be revealed.

And the difficulty of that challenge is seen most fully when we hold it alongside the images we currently hold of ourselves. Do you see yourself as a bit of a no-hoper who can't express yourself and never has anything to contribute? Bullshit! You are child of the living God, and when we see the real you, we will see you as just like Jesus. Yes you. Do you see yourself as laden down with lots of past guilt and failure that prevents you from ever standing with your head held high offering wisdom and hope to others. Bullshit! You are child of the living God, and when we see the real you, we will see you as just like Jesus. Yes you.

So that's the first of our two really extreme statements about ourselves that a resurrection imagination calls us to believe and live into which, at present, almost none of us really believe at all. You are child of the living God, and the real you, the true you, which we haven't yet seen fully, is just like Jesus. We'll know when you really believe it, because we'll see you beginning to live up to it instead of hiding your light under a bushel.

The other really extreme thing that the resurrection imagination asks us to recognise about ourselves is going to sound completely contradictory after the first one. They are actually connected, but we instinctively regard them as opposites. We may even use the one I have already described as a way of trying to hide from this second one.

This second one is the painful call to recognise myself as being directly and personally responsible for the rejection and murder of Jesus and of many others. And I don't just mean that in some sort of historical theological sense – you know, as part of the human race we

share in the sin that made Jesus's death inevitable. It is a lot more direct than that. It is recognising the painful truth that if Jesus turned up bodily among us now, I'd turn my back on him, betray him, and give my support to those who would get rid of him. And that in fact, Jesus is turning up bodily among us, and I am doing exactly that. And so are you.

There have been a few breakthroughs in our understanding of how this works recently. For example we have started to recognise more fully that the systemic racism that drove the genocidal treatment of indigenous people in this country and elsewhere is not just past history which we may have benefitted from but which we didn't perpetrate. Our eyes have begun to be opened to the almost invisible structures of privilege which we actively, though unconsciously, guard and maintain and which ensure such things as that if I get arrested and locked in a police cell overnight, the chances of me emerging alive and unscathed in the morning are measurably greater than if Uncle Den was taken in.

Those of us who are men have been having our eyes opened recently to the ways that our protection of our own opportunities and aspirations has been experienced by women as the brutal crushing of theirs.

And what about our anxious quest to get ourselves vaccinated against COVID? I want that vaccine. I get annoyed by the apparent government incompetence that keeps delaying it. I'm sick of the anxieties and fears and restrictions of the past year, and I want them vaccinated out of existence. But there won't be enough vaccine for everyone in the world for along time yet, so we've all got our hearts set on a resource that is genuinely in short supply. And Jesus, who said "what you did to the least of these", has come to us as an immune-compromised pregnant mother in a poor village in Indonesia, and yet I'm going to get vaccinated before her. Jesus is getting left to die again, so that I, who live in a country that has effectively eliminated COVID, can have my anxieties even further reduced. The world that I, and people like me, have constructed rates easing my mind as more important than saving her life.

And one of the most painful things about facing up to that is that I can't even do anything about it. If I try to take some principled stand to refuse the vaccine, she still won't get it any quicker and I'll just be dismissed as in league with the anti-vax conspiracy theorists. As our weekly prayer of confession says, "we are entangled in sin." It is not as simple as I have sinned. We are entangled in sin, entangled in the sin of a world that crucifies Jesus whoever he comes to us in, over and over again, and I have no way out.

What has this horror story got to do with a resurrection imagination? The apostle Luke tells us that when the disciples saw the wounded and risen Jesus appear among them in the upstairs room, "they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost."

If the victims of my sinfully constructed privileges suddenly turn up, I'd be terrified too. If the massacred people whose stolen land I'm living on turn up in my room, I'm going to be terrified. And that pregnant mum in that poor Indonesian village who died of COVID last week because the vaccine she needed to save her life had been sent to Australia to make me feel more comfortable in crowded pubs and football stadiums, if she turns up in my room, I'm going to be terrified. There is nothing more terrifying than having to face the victims of the deaths I've contributed to.

Of course if I'd been standing next to her and they'd said we've got just one dose left, I'd like to think that I'd have stood aside and let her have it, but the world is constructed to ensure that I'm never exposed to my victims that obviously. So the victims are everywhere, and most of the time we are just thankful that their voices have been silenced and we don't have to face them. But if the crucified one comes back ...

The first reading we heard was one of five sermons preached by the Apostle Peter and recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. All five of them point the finger directly at the crowd of listeners and say "you are the ones who killed Jesus, now repent and your sins will be forgiven." In the one we heard tonight he said, "you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." (Acts 3:15) Both our other readings tonight also make this link between our responsibility for the violent killing, and the resurrection call to repentance and forgiveness.

I said that we don't really believe this statement about ourselves either. Most of the time we kid ourselves that we wouldn't have got caught up in the mob that chanted for Jesus to be killed. We kid ourselves that we'd have been stronger than Peter and wouldn't have denied knowing Jesus. We kid ourselves that we are essentially nice good people whose sins are little more than getting grumpy and short tempered with one another from time to time, or a junk food binge, or perhaps at worst an adulterous affair. We are completely blind to the blood on our hands. And because we can't imagine ourselves as blood stained sinners, we don't even begin to comprehend the astonishing grace of the total forgiveness that is being offered to us in the outstretched wounded hands of Jesus. If you think that in your case, God doesn't really have much more to forgive than some bitchy things you've sometimes said and keeping everyone waiting for 10 seconds when you missed your slide in the liturgy, you are never going to comprehend the kind of grace and mercy that scare the pants off you and changes the world and transforms you into the spitting image of Jesus.

We were right to be terrified, because you'd think that a murdered victim returning would be some kind of zombie bent on vengeance. But no. What we have encountered is our own murdered victim returning with not even a hint of resentment, overflowing with love and mercy for us. In some ways, that's even more terrifying.

So a resurrection imagination begins with a chilling confrontation with our own murderous sin. A resurrection imagination sees the face of Jesus in every person who died of COVID in Port Moresby last week because we were demanding that our government make sure we were vaccinated first. A resurrection imagination begins to unmask those connections that we had systematically obscured from our own sight. A resurrection imagination hears the Apostle Peter's words addressing us personally, "I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. As the prophets foretold, the Messiah has suffered at your hands. Repent therefore, change track, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out." (Acts 3:17-19)

And it is at this point that the resurrection imagination can connect us back to our other unbelievable statement – that our true selves, yet to be fully seen, are just like Jesus. You see, an imagination that can't comprehend the very worst of ourselves, can't comprehend the enormity of the possibilities that lie before us either.

But when our imagination begins to grasp that the power of resurrection can take greedy, selfish, entitled, blood-stained sinners like me, or you, and take us all the way from there to

our ultimate destiny of being indistinguishable from the glorified risen Jesus, then the resurrection imagination will burn within us and we will know that nothing is impossible. When we believe that, we will really begin to change the world, because nothing will be impossible, even for you.