

The victim as forgiveness arisen

Brian O. McDermott

THE RESURRECTION HAPPENED TO THE ONE who was first crucified. The Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises follows upon the Third. But does this sequence entail that Easter is an 'afterword', an escape, simply a relief from the sorrow, labour and fatigue of the passion? In this essay I will explore, with the aid of contemporary Christology, some of the intimate linkage, indeed the profound unity-in-difference, between the Third and Fourth Weeks. The lens I shall use will be the relationship between the passion of Jesus as victim and the resurrection as the event through which he was revealed as forgiving victim.

The Third Week: the non-violent one becomes victim of violence

In much of current theology, Jesus' ministry, passion, death and resurrection form a differentiated unity. But this synthetic understanding does not obscure the fact that, historically speaking, his passion and death were mainly the consequence of the kind of ministry in which Jesus engaged. If you speak out and act out the way Jesus did, you will be killed off. Jesus proclaimed the in-breaking reign of God and hoped that people would open themselves to his message and its ramifications. People's rejection of the message was not Jesus' intention; rather, it was the frustration of his intention and mission. Even though his passion occurred as part of a long tradition of God's prophets being murdered, Jesus' passion was, in some respects, an interruption of what Jesus was about. This view receives support from those scripture scholars who believe that all predictions of the passion and resurrection attributed to Jesus in the Gospels come from the post-Easter community.

A sub-text in this perspective is the concern to eliminate from the portrait of Jesus any sense that he wanted to be a victim, that suffering and a cruel death were the goals of his life or that he deliberately provoked such terrible things in order to 'fulfil all righteousness' or out of obedience to God the Father who wanted victimization for and from the Son.¹ Employing critical victim theory, feminist and liberationist thinking has alerted us to be careful of all traditional talk of Jesus as the victim (cf. the Third Eucharistic Prayer: 'see the Victim who has reconciled us to Yourself').

A somewhat different interpretation – one which will inform the reflections that follow – views Jesus during his ministry as a person who is fully aware of ‘how the world works’ and fully cognizant that suffering and death await him because the very roots of human society, insofar as it is unredeemed and traces itself back to ‘Adam and Eve’ through ‘Cain and Abel’, consist of lies, self-deception, destructive rivalry, and scapegoating murder. One theologian writing within this perspective sees Jesus as someone who was possessed of ‘the intelligence of the victim’ all through his ministry.² This intelligence did not consist of a set of ideas but rather of a profound constitution of his consciousness that was nourished and shaped fundamentally in two ways: first, by total dependence on the Father in the Spirit, lived out as a complete imitation of the self-giving love of the Father, and, second, by a deep knowledge of the ways of the unredeemed world, of the extraordinary network of distorted desires that shape human identity and human society. Such an ‘intelligence’ knows that the Johannine ‘world’, left to itself, creates its ‘peace’, ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’ (all fraudulent and temporary in nature) in finding, again and again, an arbitrary victim and disposing of him or her. As this mechanism plays itself out, the victimizers hide from themselves the fact that they are engaged in an enterprise that has been ‘hidden from the foundations of the world’: the victimization of an Other to restore an impossible unity among the unredeemed.³

Continuing in this perspective, we can say that the Father who causes Jesus to emerge in history by the power of the Spirit also possesses – in a way appropriate to God – this ‘intelligence of the victim’. The Father, through the Word and in the Spirit, ‘gazes’ on human history and sees the lethal choices people have made from the beginning: to kill someone off to preserve or restore the (phoney) peace. So the Son becomes incarnate. To be clear: Jesus did not want to be a victim, he did not seek to be a victim as such. Being a victim is a horrible thing, it is an eventuality that God does not want and that healthy, grounded human beings do not want. But the unredeemed ‘world’ lives by victimizing and covering up the process by one form of legitimation or another, and Jesus knew this in his heart’s intelligence. Imitating his divine Source and the best of witnesses in his own Jewish tradition (such as Job and Second Isaiah) and not the destructive patterns around him, Jesus invites people into the Father’s ways, which never victimize but rather always seek the full flourishing of God’s created universe, even at cost to self, if that must be. Such a path inevitably brings about the scapegoating of the messenger, the assassination of the representative

of the Father's ways. Instead of doing the hard and gracious work of repentance and conversion to the ways of the Father that have come to expression in Jesus' ways, folks with any power at all will be tempted to perform the 'technical fix', a temptation succumbed to since the mythical days of Cain and Abel: they will assassinate the messenger or the supposed rival, and thus postpone (perhaps for ever?) the arduous work of freely-entered-into transformation.⁴

The Fourth Week: the victim of violence becomes forgiveness in person

The disciples were complicit in the mechanisms of victimization that killed off Jesus. To be sure, with the exception of Judas, they were not involved the way the Jewish leaders and Roman executioners were, for these authority figures plotted against him and actually crucified him for the sake of 'unity' and 'peace'. The disciples allowed fear and distorted desire to master them and so they forsook the Master of life. Rather than be victims out of responsible discipleship and healthily self-giving love, they allowed themselves to take part in the victimization of their leader. So when Jesus died the horrible death on the cross, the disciples were left not only bereft, disconsolate and sorrowful. They were also afflicted with their guilt and sin, with the biting recognition that they had betrayed their Lord. How this played out in the consciousness of each disciple we shall never know, but it would not be surprising if they preferred to focus on their feelings of loss and disappointment (Lk 24:21) rather than allow their guilt to come into full consciousness. After all, a wilful not-noticing accompanies all victimization. If that were not so, how could we pull it off?

On the third day, the risen and exalted Jesus appears to various disciples in various settings. The victim comes to them from God's sphere of life and glory and they experience him as gratuitously forgiving love, and this precisely as victim. The Risen One sets down no conditions. He offers the gifts of hospitality that marked his ministry, acceptance and forgiveness, which in turn enable discipleship and mission.⁵ The judged one comes as judge to the victimizers – the disciples – and judges with pure gratuitousness: he offers them forgiveness. The victim comes to the victimizers and offers them a whole new place to stand, a new creation really, one that forgiveness can produce completely on its own initiative and at no one's expense, analogous to the way God created the world from nothing and non-violently.⁶ But this new creation does not permit forgetfulness of the past. Authentic new beginnings are forged by a process that is truthful,

that relates to the past not by denial or amnesia but from a fresh love that is not bound to the past but recreative of a new relation to it. The Crucified-and-Risen One's invitation, 'Look at my hands and my feet', (Lk 24:39) does not finally represent an apologetic moment, but rather *anamnesis*, a vital dimension of the forgiveness process when initiated by the victim as such.

The Risen One is the victim, and the victim is the Risen One. The resurrection is the eschatological 'presencing' of the dead Jesus by the Father in the power of the Spirit. The Risen Jesus is not a reality chronologically 'built on' the earthly Jesus, on his ministry, passion and death. He is the earthly Jesus in his entire life lived into death, now present, alive, sharing fully in God's mode of existence and fully present to the disciples (and all of history). The *Jesus* of the passion is not memory but presence; Jesus' *passion* is a memory, for his particular, unique passion belongs to the past. But the Jesus whose human identity consists in all he came to be humanly in his living and dying now *is*, unrestrictedly *is* sheer blessing for those who were complicit in doing him in.

The Easter Jesus creatively transforms the disciples' relationship to him; that is forgiveness' way. Insofar as they become receptive participants in the reconciliation process which Jesus offers, their past as betrayers no longer has a hold on them, and while they will remember it to their dying day, they relate to it in a wholly new way as forgiven betrayers who stand on the wonderful ground of pure gratuitousness.

Exercitants and disciples

Where does the exercitant stand in all this? The First Week of the Exercises provides space for the graces of hospitality. The meditations of the First Week, inaugurated by the Principle and Foundation experience, allow exercitants to taste God's unconditional acceptance offered through their salvation-history and then to come to an experience of being redeemed, saved, transformed in their core sinfulness. For exercitants, the First Week marks the time when they experience the healing forgiveness of the present (risen) Jesus who once hung on a cross (Exx 53).⁷

In the Second Week, the exercitants have accompanied Jesus in his ministry, all the while contemplating his choices, the various kinds of people with whom he interacts, and the affections and values which draw him on. They have asked for the grace to grow in the knowledge and love of this Jesus as disciples committed to following him, to be

drawn further into his force field as he, the faithful Son, serves God's project in the world. The Two Standards meditation puts it starkly: the grasping way of death-dealing imitation, which consists of the flourishing of self and one's group or tribe at the expense of others ('riches, honour, pride'), and the receptive way of life-giving imitation, which entails the flourishing of self and one's group through self-giving love so that, if the choice is forced on one, one would rather be treated as a victim than victimize others ('poverty, reproaches, humility', Exx 146–147).

Moving into the Third Week, some experience a deepening of this grace of personal forgiveness received in the First (Exx 193, 197). But most importantly, this Week provides the opportunity for exercitants to be allied with Jesus the victim, to be in solidarity with him and with all victims in the world (including that portion of self that is victim of one's own sinning by being still caught up in the 'world's' mendacity and murder). For many retreatants, the death of Jesus occasions feelings of loss, bereavement and sorrow (Exx 203, 206). They have what might be called a Marian experience of the death. Indeed, Ignatius writes: 'Consider . . . Our Lady's loneliness along with her deep grief and fatigue; then, on the other hand, the fatigue of the disciples' (Exx 208). In a way that is not self-righteous, retreatants' experience of the Risen Jesus often differs from that of the disciples, for the retreatants have acknowledged their participation in the sinful world in the First Week and have experienced the Lord's redeeming love in a deep part of themselves.

At the tomb

Directors of the Exercises often note that one of the most powerful periods in the retreat begins when the retreatant contemplates Jesus' burial. Many directors counsel their retreatants to let go of Scripture and Ignatius' text at this point and to wait, and notice, and be as one who has run out of all consolation and of some ordinary resources – except living faith, the presence of the director, the liturgy of the Church, and the routines of the day.

Feelings of confusion, disorientation, powerlessness can fill retreatants at this point. They can seek company with disciples, but then find them to be in a similar state. They may remember some things Jesus did or said, but rather than being luminous, these memories seem hemmed in by death. And they wait and watch, attentive to whatever is given them to notice.

At some point, in each case, a stirring of life, a sign of newness emerges. Or a report comes to them of an experience of one or more disciples. But these stirrings, signs or reports do not come from turning to the next page in one of the Gospels, or to Ignatius' text of the Fourth Week; they come rather as interior gift to the exercitant, incalculably but undeniably. Soon they are in an experience of abundance and glory, perhaps understated, perhaps dramatic, but in either case, wonderfully real.

The unity of the Third and Fourth Weeks

Thanks to theologians such as Rowan Williams and James Alison, it is possible for us to appreciate that the unity of the passion and the resurrection resides in great part in the extraordinary passage, wrought by God in the power of the Spirit, of Jesus the victim becoming living, present forgiveness-in-person. The victim as forgiveness, if you will. The many theologians who assert that the resurrection is vindication of Jesus, his person, his message, his entire agency are surely right, but essential here is the enormously consoling fact that this vindication occurs *at nobody's expense*: it is not vindication as vengeance. Here in human history, finally, there occurs a vindication, a justification, a 'making right' that does not kill off someone, that does not do violence to anybody, that does not give tit for tat, that does not exclude anyone. All of those moves are precisely what happens in the endless cycles of violence that constitute the bloody cohesion of human societies and human identities insofar as they are forged against an 'other and at the expense of an "other"'. The resurrection is the new creation of the disciples as forgiven penitents called into a new mode of existence imitative of Jesus' way (which is, primordially, the Father's way), of healthily self-giving love, in which one forsakes all taking of hostages and all making of victims, even if one is then pushed into suffering as the victim of others' choices.⁸ This new creation, this new society – *ecclesia* – is caused by the transformed Jesus, who, contrary to all appearances, did not die the death we humans have constructed (namely, death as waste, as failure, as 'endgame'), but rather died the death God intended to be part of God's good creation (that is, death as passage to greater life).

Exercitants in the Third Week pray, theologically speaking, in a complex place. Throughout the making of the Exercises, including the Third Week, they relate in real time to the living, present Jesus, the Risen One.⁹ Yet the affective experience of the Third Week is shaped by the images of the suffering and dying Jesus. The present, risen Jesus

is the one who suffered and died. The Risen Jesus is not a 'creation from nothing' but 'a re-creation in fidelity'. The feelings of grief, sorrow and pain prompted by one's accompanying Jesus in passion are authentic ways by which living faith relates to painful dimensions of Jesus' historical identity. It has the feeling of actuality. Stepping back and considering the experience 'from the balcony', as it were, the one making the Exercises would immediately agree that these events – insofar as they were Jesus' personal experience – belong to past history and that Jesus will never suffer and die again in his own personal history. But caught up contemplatively in the events of the passion as they are imaginatively retrieved, the retreatant feels as though it is all happening in real time.

The Fourth Week allows the exercitant to come home to the full import of the entire Exercises, that it is the Risen One who gratuitously accepts and forgives the retreatant, it is the Risen One in whose company he or she walks as he or she contemplates him in his ministry unto suffering and death. And, in real time, retreatants undergo transformation in their being and their awareness with 'the intelligence of the victim', which, in Ignatian terms, is the awareness of any person or community insofar as they live and act under the standard of Christ, insofar as they belong to the third class of persons and insofar as they have the courage to ask for the third degree of humility. It is apparent that all these graces of the Second Week, tested by participation in the Third Week, are graces that flow from the Christ of the Fourth Week: the victim who does not victimize, the judge who does not condemn, the excluded one who is inclusion in person, the violated one who is non-violent. In a word, these graces flow from Jesus as gratuitous, self-giving love.

The descent into hell

Theologians have offered two different interpretations of the descent into hell: either it symbolizes the solidarity of Jesus in his experience of abandonment and death with all those who have died and are awaiting salvation, or it expresses the trans-historical influence of the crucified but now risen Jesus relating to all past human history, to all the dead.¹⁰ In terms of the Exercises, it would seem at first blush that the story could be located in either the Third Week or the Fourth, although Ignatius locates it in the Fourth. Ignatius' instinct seems the right one; this becomes evident if we ask ourselves these questions: is the story of Jesus' descent into hell a story told about a victim-unto-death, narrated by those who have participated in his victimization? Or is it a story that

can only be told about a victim now. 'risen' as forgiveness in person, narrated by those who are now experiencing a completely inclusive forgiveness that is offered by that transformed victim? It would seem that the belief that Jesus-as-victim died in positive solidarity with all other victims as such, as well as the conviction about his trans-historical influence, are discernments that only resurrection faith can fashion.

The story of the descent is a dramatization of the universal and inclusive self-giving love of the risen victim. He is gratuitous love for all victims and gratuitous love for all victimizers, not because being victim and being victimizer are the same thing; assuredly, they are not. But the Risen Jesus, who is totally patterned on the Father in the Spirit, rains love and mercy on the just and the unjust (Mt 6:45), without division, without separation, without confusion, without changing one into the other. Praying the descent story can take the form of imagining the Risen Jesus appearing to the victims and victimizers of the past. One might, for example, behold Jesus coming to the slaughtered members of a Canaanite family and their Hebrew killer who, before the deed, had recently arrived from a long escape from Egyptian slavery. One could contemplate Jesus visiting David and Bathsheba's husband Uriah, who got in the way of the king's distorted desire. But there is no need to stay within the story of Israel, one could move to a different tale in a different part of God's world, and watch the Risen One as he shares himself with an Inca youth and with the priest who, supported completely (?) by the men and women of the community, slit his throat on a mountain top in Central America 500 years before the time of Jesus. The name of the anonymous young and the old who have been sacrificed that others might flourish is 'legion', for they are a vast multitude.

Conclusion

The Risen One communicates a whole new way of being, a way that is not violent, not victimizing, not divisive, a way of being that flourishes, but not at the cost of others. Rejoicing with Jesus rejoicing, consoled by Jesus the consoler, invited to share in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation in companionship with the Risen One, the exercitant is caught up in the abundant presence of Jesus and strengthened by his Spirit to live his values through life-giving imitation, wanting to turn to victims of this world in solidarity, to turn to victimizers in loving confrontation and non-cooperation, intent not

on one's own goodness or sinfulness, but wanting to love as Jesus loves in a world that insatiably seeks victims for a false reconciliation.

Brian O. McDermott SJ is the rector of the Jesuit community at Georgetown University, Washington, DC and tertian director of the Maryland and New York Provinces of the Society of Jesus. He has a doctorate in systematic theology from the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and has written in the areas of Christology, theological anthropology, Ignatian spirituality and authority and leadership.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Losing your innocence but not your hope' in Maryanne Stevens (ed), *Reconstructing the Christ symbol: essays in feminist Christology* (New York/Mahwah, 1993), pp 30–53.

2 James Alison, *The joy of being wrong: original sin through Easter eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), ch 5. I am greatly indebted to Alison for these reflections, as well as to Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Harrisburg, 1994).

3 René Girard is a primary inspiration for Alison. One of his books is entitled, *Things hidden from the foundation of the world*, trans Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone, 1987).

4 While Ignatius seems ordinarily to be composing the Exercises with 'the intelligence of the victim', at one place he falls back on a view of divine omnipotence that is untouched by the perspective of the victim as revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus: 'Consider how [Jesus'] divinity hides itself; that is, how he could destroy his enemies but does not . . .' (Exx 196)! The God revealed in Job, the Servant Songs of Isaiah and in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, does not create victims and cannot do so. There is no limitation. See James G. Williams, *The Bible, violence and the sacred: liberation from the myth of sanctioned violence* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991). The translation of the Exercises I am using is that of George E. Ganss, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (St Louis, 1992).

5 All of the resurrection stories in the Gospels refer to a commissioning of the disciples by Jesus to either baptize people or to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins. They are to share the gift they have themselves so abundantly received.

6 See James Alison, *Raising Abel: the recovery of the eschatological imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp 49–56.

7 Ignatius invites the one making the Exercises to ask Jesus on the cross the following: 'How is it that he, though he is the Creator, has come to make himself a human being? How is it that he has passed from eternal life to death here in time, and to die in this way for my sins?' (Exx 53). The answer to these questions has everything to do with gratuitous love and what it is willing to do in and for a world (including all retreatants) that lives off the mechanism of victimization and that, of itself, cannot change its ways.

8 James Alison develops these themes at great length in *The joy of being wrong*.

9 A fine treatment of our relationship with the Risen Jesus in the here and now is provided by Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: learning the heart of the gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

10 For the first view, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium paschale: the mystery of Easter*, trans Aidan Nichols OP (Grand Rapids, 1990); the second interpretation is held by, among others,

Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and man*, trans Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, 1968).