

Resurrection and imagination

‘Did not our hearts burn within us . . .’

Philip Shano

Introduction

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS BRINGS LIBERATION and a new perspective on life to those who experience its effects. This liberation is experienced in the encounter with the Risen Lord. The fruit of our meeting with Jesus is the release of an energy which results in a transformation in the human spirit, in the way we see life experiences and in the way we choose to spend our lives. In Scripture, we see that this is no less true of encounters with the Risen Jesus than it is with the Jesus of Nazareth who was sought out by so many in his journeys. One of the liberating gifts offered by the Risen Lord is a release of the imagination.

One of the saddest facts of life in our world is that we too often suffer from a failure of the imagination. The imagination is often trapped. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus whose faces were so downcast until they recognized the Risen Lord, we can be stuck in an incomplete understanding of the events and facts of our lives. The powerful gift of the imagination which we possess as human beings is often feared, ignored and forgotten – both in ordinary time and in times of crisis. There can be a lack of trust in the imagination, seeing it as fanciful and as leading towards nothing more than unreal fantasy. We do not always pause long enough to imagine a better world for ourselves and others, a better way of dealing with an economic or political or religious crisis, a way out of the mess and hopelessness of so much in our world, or a new way of seeing our situation. The disciples on the road to Emmaus received the gift of having their eyes opened in a new way so that they could recognize Jesus. This new sense of vision gave them the gift of being able to imagine Jesus in such a way that their hearts burned with a desire to spread his message. This burning desire is the gift of a liberated imagination. It is the gift which our world so desperately needs if we are to find a way out of the many struggles that we face.

It is the release of the imagination which is our primary focus. This article will explore the gift and power of the imagination from the vantage point of the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola. It will start from the assumption that the liberated energy of the imagination is one of the 'true and most sacred effects' (Exx 223) of the resurrection. I will begin with a brief look at the imagination. This will be followed by a series of points on the resurrection and its effects. Chief among these is the power inherent in the release of the imagination. The article will end with a few reflections on the responsible use of the imagination. Although this article will not focus specifically on the practice of directing people through the Fourth Week, the insights are rooted in my experience of directing the Spiritual Exercises at the Guelph Centre of Spirituality for the past ten years. In that respect, it is my hope that this will help other directors to imagine other ways of offering the Fourth Week to exercitants.

The imagination

The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye wrote in *The educated imagination*, 'No matter how much experience we may gather in life, we can never in life get the dimension of experience that the imagination gives us'.¹ He says that the imagination is a 'constructive power' of the mind.² If it is not set free and allowed to function properly, there can be a sense of claustrophobia.

St Ignatius had the insight that the creative faculty of the imagination must be encouraged to function freely in the one who has entered into an experience of the Spiritual Exercises. His exercises are designed in such a way that they awaken the imagination. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach has pointed out that the entry of the 'whole person' into the mystery of God is only complete in the Spiritual Exercises when 'the imagination is also integrated into the spiritual movement'.³ Ignatius makes use of the imagination in our journey towards intimacy and a deeper oneness with Christ. He gives the greatest freedom possible to the imagination, so that we can experience 'greater spiritual relish and fruit' (Exx 2). It is this faculty which moves a person through the dynamics of Ignatian prayer. Ignatius assumes that the person who has entered into the experience of the Fourth Week has learned to appreciate, trust and use the imagination. Of course, he also knows from his own experience of being deceived by the imagination that it is necessary to control the imagination (e.g. Exx 74) and not to allow it to deteriorate into hallucinations and illusions. Discernment is as important for the

processing of our imagination as it is for all other data in our interior lives.

For Ignatius, the imagination is closely connected to the gift of contemplative prayer with its accompanying intimate knowledge and love both of the Lord and of one's own life. Kolvenbach points out that Ignatius 'has discovered the positively creative power of the imagination which can make Christ present to a person and that person contemporaneous to the mystery . . . thus, paradoxically, the imagination can open a person to the very core of reality'.⁴ The imagination plays an important part in leading us to an intimate knowledge of the Lord (Exx 104). The person who prays with the Spiritual Exercises has entered into that world where the gift of the imagination is helpful in remembering the past, but also looking into the future possibilities with a discerning stance. However, for Ignatius the use of the active imagination cannot be confined to a simple exercise in conjuring up a long list of future possibilities. The Exercises are essentially about decision-making based on our prayerful consideration and discernment of the possibilities which spring from our discovery of God's dreams for us.

The imagination is the power or faculty of forming images of and rendering present what is not actually present. Frye says that the imagination is 'the power of constructing possible models of human experience. In the world of the imagination, anything goes that's imaginatively possible, but nothing really happens. If it did happen, it would move out of the world of imagination into the world of action.'⁵ Ignatius is quite interested in the world of action. In that respect, his focus is on the constructive function of the imagination. The use of the active imagination in the Spiritual Exercises is central to the discernment of God's path for the individual. The imagination is a creative force or energy which gives us the ability to visualize and bring into existence the uncreated potential that lies within us. It takes us beyond our present familiar surroundings, helping us to see that there is more to our lives and more to the world than what we see before us. It is our decision-making which moves us beyond potential to the world of action. The intimate knowledge that Ignatius invites us to in the Second Week (Exx 104) involves more than taking a quick glance at Jesus, at our own lives and at the world around us. Intimate knowledge takes time and intimacy. For Ignatius, it is rooted in contemplation. Walter Burghardt points out that contemplation is 'a long, loving look at the real'.⁶ That long, loving look is only possible when we give free rein to our imagination, letting ourselves sit and ponder Jesus, our lives, our

world, another person. The imagination has the ability to foster a sense of intimacy that will lead a person to give themselves totally to another.

This intimate knowledge, which is the fruit of the encounter with Jesus, will naturally result in a deeper love and in a desire to express that love in action. The imagination is one of the powers which drives this dynamic. It is not a passive gift which we receive. It is much more than the act of making images and pictures, as powerful a gift as that may be. There is a creative power within the imagination which moves us to action. In *Religion and imagination*, John Coulson states,

When we 'use imagination', we begin to see our world differently. Our standpoint or focus changes, but this act of imagination remains incomplete until spontaneously and creatively we gain an enlarged sense of reality. But our powers of perception are more than merely enlarged. They are reordered.⁷

Certain images have the power to move our hearts and to lead to a change in our lives. An energy is released when an image grabs us. We are moved to act not by notions, but by what seizes our imagination. If we can imagine something, then we can achieve it. The failure of so many leaders in the political, business and religious world to create alternatives which are sustainable and healthy is rooted precisely in their inability to allow their imagination to have free rein.

The intimate knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth which is experienced in the earlier weeks of the Spiritual Exercises makes it possible for us to use our imagination to experience the effects of the resurrection of Jesus when we come to the Fourth Week. We know and love Jesus to such an extent that we are free enough to experience his presence even after his death. The imagination is also a gift of the Risen Lord to those who encounter him. Ignatius says that the divinity is now manifest in the 'true and most sacred effects' (Exx 223) of the resurrection. The liberation of the imagination is one of these effects. It is to this liberated imagination that we will return after taking time to look at the mystery of the resurrection as it is presented in the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises.

The resurrection in the Spiritual Exercises

The Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises, with its grace of being glad and rejoicing intensely, comes as a great relief to those who have just laboured through the passion with Christ. They are ready for some joy! However, the labour is not over. Being rooted in our intimate

relationship with Christ, the joy of the Fourth Week is a transforming joy which moves us to service. As Michael Ivens points out, 'Fourth Week joy will constitute an élan towards apostolic mission, a source of strength, energy and courage to participate in the work of the Kingdom'.⁸ This joy engages the whole person and has an impact on everyday experience. There is a strong emphasis on participation and unity with Christ in the Third and Fourth Weeks. This participation leads to engagement with the 'enterprise' of Christ. 'Whoever wishes to join me in this enterprise must be willing to labour with me, that by following me in suffering, they may follow me in glory' (Exx 95).

There is a simplicity to the exercises of this final week. It is difficult to contemplate the resurrection *per se*. Ignatius offers a series of apparitions – beginning with Jesus' appearance to his mother. The different apparitions of the Risen Jesus are ways of contemplating the one mystery of the resurrection. The diverse appearances provide us with a variety of ways of encountering the new way in which the Lord is present. The Risen Jesus appears to his mother and to his friends in ways which they can recognize and accept. Although we each have our own experience of the Lord's apparition to us, the focus of our prayer in this week is clear and is something we share in common. 'The exercitant is present in a receptive and unencumbered prayer to the single reality of the joy-giving Risen Christ.'⁹ In his recent article on the joy of the Risen Christ, Brian O'Leary states that the grace of the Fourth Week comes only when the person moves out of self and identifies with Jesus. This identity begins in the compassion of the Third Week.

The grace being asked for in the Fourth Week is not joy of whatsoever kind, but that particular joy that is rejoicing in another's joy. It is not, therefore, the joy of realizing that as Christ is risen, so I too will rise, or that my redemption is now definitively sealed. Such joy may well be experienced, . . . but it is not the precise grace that Ignatius suggests that we ask for. This is rather the totally selfless joy that is the exact mirror image of the totally selfless compassion which was asked for in the Third Week.¹⁰

The effects of the resurrection

The joy of the Fourth Week is often a quiet and gentle kind of joy. It is a joy that is experienced in the fruits of the resurrection. In the fourth point of the first exercise of this week (Exx 223), Ignatius has us consider the divinity's appearance in its true and most sacred effects.

Once we have received the gifts suggested by the Exercises, we have to ask what difference these gifts make in our lives. What are the fruits or effects of the grace of participation in the selfless joy of Christ? The resurrection has a power in our lives. Basically, the effects of the resurrection are seen in the actual lives of those who encounter the Risen Lord – the shift from doubt and disbelief to faith and trust; the shift from being despondent to burning with a desire to serve; the shift from sorrow to joy. These personal effects will have an impact on the individual's engagement with the Church and with the world.

A first effect of the resurrection is the release of an energy within the person. We may use different words to describe it, but the experience of a meeting with the Risen Lord is the gift of something coming alive in us which we want to communicate to others. Earlier I referred to this energy as being connected with the power of the imagination. Some might speak of having a new freedom. The disciples on the road to Emmaus spoke of their hearts burning within them as they spoke to the Risen Jesus. Many of the resurrection accounts involve people moving quickly to tell others the stories of how they have encountered Jesus. We must not mistake this energy with being an unfocused movement of rushing around. Note the contemplative stance of Mary Magdalen as she stood weeping outside the tomb (Jn 20:11–18). The energy that is given to us in the resurrection requires the kind of time that allows for a long, loving look at the new reality. Furthermore, this energy is only possible when we are caught up in a selfless love. So many of the apparitions reveal that there was a gradual discovery on the part of the early followers of Jesus that 'It is the Lord!' They begin by being caught up with their own pain and confusion. It is only when we move out of ourselves that we are able to recognize Jesus.

A second effect is related to the first. The energy is *for* something. There must be a transformation in the life of the person who encounters the Risen Lord. The person who states, 'I have seen the Lord!' has had an experience that is accompanied by the gift of peace, love, faith, consolation, hope, a desire to serve, vision and so on. Those gifts of the resurrection lead to a new way of living. Discernment will be required to help the person know what that new way of living will look like. The resurrection resulted in a new relationship between Christ and those who followed him. The resurrection must transform every person who experiences its effects. They, in turn, find themselves desirous of bringing about the transformation of the world. The imaginative energy which has been released in the resurrection of Jesus means that we experience a reordering of our perceptions. This is what happens to the

disciples on the road to Emmaus. 'And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?"' (Lk 24:31-32). They experienced the kind of reordering of their powers of perception referred to earlier. This reordering is usually accompanied by a desire to change the world in the same ways that Jesus brought about change, namely through inviting people to love. That is why the Second Week grace of intimate knowledge is so central to the Ignatian process of discernment. When we are in love, our whole lives change and we open ourselves to personal transformation. This personal level of change naturally moves outwards. This is why the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God makes so much sense in its placement in the Exercises. Ignatius begins that contemplation with two essential reminders about a love which is outward looking: love ought to manifest itself in deeds and love consists in a mutual sharing of goods (Exx 230-231).

Another effect of the resurrection is evident in the communal dimension of so many of the apparitions. Those who meet the Risen Lord have an increased desire to help in the building of Church and community. Even before the formation of community, there is a prior shift which happens in the person. This is the shift to a communal spirituality. It is difficult to be alone in joy. We have a human need to share good news. It is much more natural to desire being alone in our suffering than in our joy. The Fourth Week includes a shift in emphasis from the self to the whole body, the community. The resurrection means that God has found a new way to be with us and we have found a new way to be with God. God's way of being with us is expressed in the outpouring of the Spirit in a continuous way. Our way of being with one another and with God is in the context of community.

The effects of the resurrection are not confined to our personal interior lives. There is also an effect on the world. The joy of Christ is outward moving. We are asked in the fifth point of the first exercise (Exx 224) to participate in the 'office of consoler' with Christ. We are asked to share our consolation with others, not only to receive it. There is an invitation to a mission. Our desire is that others will have this same joy. The focus is outwards. While Ignatius does not exclude an emotional love for God, he does stress that the main thing is for us to make ourselves available to God. In the resurrection narratives, the Risen Christ commands those who see him to 'go and tell the brethren' - that is, to move out and spread the gospel to others. This mission is the enterprise that Ignatius refers to in the exercise on the Kingdom of

Christ, inviting us 'not to be deaf to his call' (Exx 91). The energy that is communicated to us by the Risen Lord gives us the energy to be available to others in ways that are filled with compassion.

Imagination as effect

The final effect of the resurrection that I will deal with has already been explored in this article. It is the liberation of the imagination. However, I would like to say a few more things about this. As we live out of the resurrection, we experience a kind of deconstruction of the limits of our personal imagination. The resurrection lies beyond our dreams and vastly beyond our powers. Its effects in our lives also take us beyond all conceivable limits and horizons. The resurrection opens us up to an entirely new world of possibilities. It takes us to a whole new level of meaning and exploration. That new world is founded on the creative and constructive power of the imagination. We short-circuit and restrict the real power of the imagination and the passionate life that it can lead to when we allow it to remain at the level of descriptions of the colours, sights, sounds, smells that we experience in prayer. Ignatius was on to something more in his realization about the power of the imagination in a discernment process. Here are a couple of hints at the imagination's power.

The imagination has the potential to keep us alive and even thrive in situations where the ability to survive should be in question. Many individuals who have found themselves in situations of abuse, torture and persecution have been able to close their eyes to the frightening realities around them and imagine safe places. This does not eliminate or justify the pain, but it does say that there is a power in the imagination. There is a strong link between the creative use of the faculty of the imagination and survival. How much of the world's most beautiful music, painting, poetry and other creative expressions have their roots in the suffering of an individual or a whole people! The pain inflicted on people by another individual or by the state does not have the kind of power over them which traps their spirit. The power of their imagination is greater than the power of the persecutor. This is precisely the power that is evident in the mystery of the resurrection. The suffering and death of Jesus did not end the possibilities that were inherent in his life. Even in the face of the persecution, the early Church continued to imagine the continued spread of the gospel.

The resurrection means that there are even newer things that can be seen with the eyes of faith. We no longer need to be limited by our past or by our own sense of inadequacy or by a sense that change is

impossible in our personal lives or in the world around us. We are often restricted by the limits of the horizon that we see in front of us. This is also true of those in politics, business or religion who make decisions. New possibilities are not always evident to us. The resurrection blows the evident horizon wide open and opens us up to a new horizon, a world of new possibilities. One of the effects of the resurrection in our lives is that we no longer need to be like Thomas, doubting until we see the visible and tangible evidence of newness. The early Church is evidence of this power of the imagination. The accounts we read in the Acts of the Apostles reveal individuals and communities who were not bound by their past or by the social, cultural and political horizon in which they lived. St Paul is a good example of the freeing power of an encounter with the Risen Lord. Paul's experience of conversion can be seen as an illustration of the power that the imagination has to free us from our past. Paul writes of letting go of the past and straining ahead for what is still to come (Phil 3:13). He has left his past life behind and his heart burns with a great desire to spread the story of Jesus. In *The great code*, Northrop Frye says, 'resurrection is not renewal or rebirth or revival or restoration: all these words mean a new cycle of time, and are in the last analysis the opposite of resurrection'.¹¹ He says that the resurrection transcends history. It is 'a leap out of time altogether'.¹² The imagination which is released by the resurrection does not merely restore and revive what already is. It creates the possibility for something new in the personal life of an individual, in the corporate life of a community and in the global life of the world.

Responsibility of the imagination

Our encounters with the Risen Lord present us with a mission. Along with the other gifts of the Risen Lord, we are given the grace of the imagination so that we can carry out this mission. The imagination has the power to move us towards personal transformation and the transformation of our world. So long as we can imagine a better world, we can help to bring that about. Just because the faculty of the imagination makes all things possible does not mean that all those things *should* be brought into being. We must recall the need for careful discernment as we face the many possibilities that lie before us. The imagination must be used in a responsible way. Rooted in a conviction that we are united with God in the imagination, Northrop Frye says that we have a need never to cease to educate and refine our imaginations. The educated imagination has work to do in the world. It has the task of coming up with a vision of the society we want to live in. We cannot

choose whether we will have or use this gift. 'We have only the choice between a badly trained imagination and a well trained one.'¹³ From an Ignatian perspective, this education is expressed in the dynamics of discernment. There are implications of the use of the power and potential of a liberated imagination for individuals and communities in our world. History shows many abuses of the imagination. However, if we can imagine a world that is marked by gospel justice, we can help to bring it about. This requires a movement out of self. This was the movement which caused the disciples on the road to Emmaus to come alive in a new way. This is the movement which Ignatius offers in the Fourth Week shift to the 'office of consoler' (Exx 224) and the 'mutual sharing' (Exx 231) that marks the love that is the goal of the *Contemplatio*. It is in that shift to selflessness and a movement outward that we set the powerful hope that is offered by the imagination. It is a hope which allows us to bring the divine into our world. It is this gift which was offered to the disciples on the road to Emmaus as Jesus opened their eyes and gave them a new understanding about their experience. This new understanding gave them a new power in their fulfilment of the mission of Jesus.

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NOTES

1 Northrop Frye, *The educated imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), p 42.

2 *Ibid.*, p 50.

3 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'Images and imagination in the Spiritual Exercises', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS) vol XVIII, no 54 (1987), p 13.

4 *Ibid.*, p 14.

5 Frye, pp 5-6.

6 Walter Burghardt, 'Contemplation' in *Church* (Winter 1989), p 14.

7 John Coulson, *Religion and imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p 8.

8 Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1998), pp 162-163.

9 *Ibid.*, p 164.

10 Brian O'Leary, 'The joy of the Risen Christ', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* vol XXX, no 91 (1999), pp 46–47.

11 Northrop Frye, *The great code – the Bible and literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p 72.

12 *Ibid.*, p 98.

13 Frye, *The educated imagination*, p 57.