

Happy Ending

Most people like a happy ending to a story. Sometimes they want to change existing classics which have tragic conclusions so that they end happily. Oxford professor John Barton points out that in the eighteenth century the tragedy of King Lear was changed so that Lear was restored to the throne. The same was true in Handel's oratorio about Jephtha's daughter, who in the Bible met a sorrowful end. Handel introduced a divine intervention so that the girl's life would be saved after all.

In modern times there seems to be more willingness to confront despair. So we want the story to end that way if it is supposed to. We do not like "improvements" to such stories because we feel such happy endings are not really endings at all, but mere appendages. We do not prefer characters who suffer in Shakespeare and the Bible to live by different principles than those in real life.

We Christians view the events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the greatest drama of all time. We dislike a facile happy ending to the story as though God were a magician who waved a magic wand and wiped away all of Christ's pain with a brand new life. That is why the Easter stories insist that Jesus wore the marks of his passion in his risen life.

Moreover, Christ's resurrection is not tacked onto the passion story like a pleasant addition. Nor is it simply a delicious surprise nor a fascinating unusual fact such as Australian Koala's never drink water---just the alcoholic juice of the Eucalyptus leaf. The faith statement that Jesus rose from the dead never to die again means we have a different kind of story. We have it on God's word that the life and death of Jesus was not the result of random historical forces, but part of an eternal plan for our salvation. God is the author of this drama. Hence the Gospel is not a tragedy but a story with a real happy ending that is consistent with the life and death of Jesus.

John's gospel especially contains this insight. The moment of Christ's death is already a moment of glory. Easter so illumines the suffering that went before it that the very cross itself is a proof of light. This theme is beautifully remembered in a text from the liturgy of the Eastern Church. "Since it brings life, the tomb of Jesus is lovelier indeed than paradise.

It is the fountain from which our resurrection springs.” St. John is so taken with the Easter joy that rings beyond the walls of this world that he devotes two full chapters to the resurrection appearances. We have seen the first one. We proceed now to look at his last chapter.

The Lakeside Appearance (John 21:1-14)

The scene is the Galilean lakeside, the site so filled with the joyous memories of the beginning of Christ’s ministry. Seven of Christ’s disciples joined Peter on a fishing trip. They fished all-night and caught nothing. At dawn they returned to shore and saw a man standing on the beach. He asked them if they caught anything. They said, “No.” The man told them to cast their net one more time on the right side of the boat---the lucky side---and they will catch fish.

They followed his advice and could scarcely bring in their net because it was overloaded with fish. This event is similar to the other abundant gifts in John: wine at Cana, bread on the mountain, living water at Tabernacles, eternal life from the Good Shepherd and the outpouring of the Spirit. John then realized, “It is the Lord!” (verse 7). This so excited Peter that he jumped out of the boat and waded to shore to meet Jesus. The others brought their catch of 153 fish to the beach. The fish symbolize the great numbers who will be brought into the Christian community. St. Jerome stated that it was commonly held in New Testament times that the lake had 153 species of fish, though his source has never been found. Still, his conclusion is valid, namely, that the Gospel would be preached to every imaginable type of person in the world.

Jesus had brought bread and lit a charcoal fire. “Come and have breakfast,” he said. Christ’s meal reminded them of the loaves miracle and the giving of the Spirit. This event was another faith testimony to the reality of the resurrection. The gospels present a risen Jesus who could be felt, touched, seen, heard, eat bread and fish, make a charcoal fire, walk, talk, give instruction, argue, overcome doubt---and insist he was not a ghost.

The cumulative effect of the numerous resurrection narratives is that Jesus was truly, really, physically present to the disciples in his appearances. The “non-recognition stories” affirm the new spiritual quality of his risen body. The “recognition” stories just as strongly affirm the realism of his appearances and the certainty of the witnesses. The risen Jesus of the gospel narratives is robust, realistic, credible, involved and practical enough to cook breakfast.

Your risen body, Lord, I do behold

Alleluia!

This day must all the world be told.

Alleluia!

Love has beaten death.

Given us the Spirit's breath.

Do You Love Me, Peter? (John 21:15-19)

After breakfast Jesus asked Peter if he loved him more than all the others. "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus commissioned him to feed his lambs. Jesus repeated the question again. Peter once more affirmed his love and was told to feed Christ's sheep. A third time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him more than anyone else. Distressed that Jesus seemed not to believe him, he complained that Jesus knew everything. He certainly knew that he was loved by Peter. "Feed my sheep," replied Christ.

Peter's public declarations of love put behind him once and for all his triple denial during the passion. Seldom have we heard of a more touching call to leadership. Here is a vision of leadership that is founded on love and affection between the leader and Jesus---and between the leader and his potential followers. This "love model" of leadership balances the "institutional model" of leadership seen at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus made Peter the rock upon which his church would be built (see Matthew 16:13-20). The total ministry of Peter would embrace his call as Rock and as Lover.

The Easter scene at the beach discloses a vision of leadership that flows from an adult view of loving union, trust, and respect. Jesus took a public risk to ask Peter for love's vows. Jesus did not first ask for apologies about the denial. He simply voiced a candid appeal for affection. Peter caught the precise dignity of the moment, the fresh opportunities to be born again. He put behind him his failures and disappointments. He did his weeping and confessed his sins. This Easter dawn at the beach where Peter had launched so many fishing trips---his homeland of Galilee---signaled the beginning of a new creation, a new Peter who sang out unabashedly of his love for Jesus.

He would never be a St. John taking spiritual flights like an eagle. He could not dream of matching the eloquence or literary genius of St. Paul. He had a humbler form of genius, the capacity to become the first chief shepherd of the church. He remained lovingly faithful to Jesus until his martyrdom in the circus of Nero some thirty years later. Michelangelo has memorialized the dual qualities of leadership in Peter at the base of the great dome in St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Inscribed there is the "Rock" text from Matthew and the "Love" text from John. Jesus knew his man and was not disappointed by his choice.

The Disciple Jesus Loved (John 21:20-25)

The disciple whom Jesus loved was John the son of Zebedee, the brother of James and an apostle. Tradition says he moved to Ephesus with the Mother of Jesus and that he lived to the age of 94, which may account for the verse in this section that states he would live until the Second Coming of Jesus (verse 22). He died a natural death and not as a martyr like the other apostles.

St. John is best known as the apostle of love, as can be seen in the tone and mood he set in writing this gospel and his three New Testament letters. He wrote from experience, especially as the best friend of Jesus. He was not only capable of loving Jesus, but of being loved by him. In true love, one must be willing to be loved as well as to love.

It may seem remarkable that the Son of God was able to have a personal friend he seemed to like and love more than others. We might imagine that Jesus would have loved everyone with equal affection, or that he at least loved people with the same intimacy they showed to him. Yet Jesus shows himself to be entirely human in his feelings and desires. There is nothing contrary to the Gospel spirit in this.

Some argue that Christian love is supposed to be so all embracing that it is shared equally with everyone. But the best preparation for loving everyone is to develop intimate friendship with those who are near us. We begin by loving our friends who are close to us, then we expand the circle of our affections until they reach out to everyone. If we begin to try to love everyone first, our effort will be little more than an abstraction, like the idealist who loved the world, but could not stand people. Loving all men and women means being positively disposed to them and being ready to help should they come our way.

Love is a habit which demands practice. We cannot practice on the whole human race, but we can practice on the people in our circle of acquaintances. We accede to their wishes even when contrary to our own. We share their burdens and respond to their faults with kindness and a forgiving attitude. We note their good points and try to imitate them. Quietly, over a long period, we root love in our hearts and slowly cultivate the tree of affection.

This is the special gift of St. John as beloved disciple of Jesus. He is a mirror that shows us such an attractive and appealing quality in Jesus, the value of making deep and lasting friends with the people at hand. In finding John to be such a good personal friend, Jesus did what we all can do, practice friendship with a few so as to give love to the many.

John concludes his gospel by telling us that what he wrote is the truth and that there was so much more to write that "I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written" (verse 25).

We began this commentary by listening to the singing of the community of St. John the Beloved in Ephesus. They chanted praise to the Word become flesh. We close with the same scene, this time allowing the lens of our mind to focus on the old apostle thinking of the best friendship he ever had. We have witnessed the great affection that existed between him and the apostles and the privileged blessing of having the Holy Mother of Jesus in his home, radiating faith and prayer while he wrote his extraordinary gospel.

The singing has not stopped and the 90-year-old apostle begins another message to his community----

Beloved, let us love one another....

-1 John 4:7

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