



St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

Fleeing Jesus

And they all deserted him and ran away. A young man followed with nothing on but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the cloth in their hands and ran away naked.¹

And Jacob was left alone. Then someone wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, 'Let me go, for day is breaking.' Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The other said, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he replied. He said, 'No longer are you to be called Jacob, but Israel since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.' He replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' With that, he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, 'Because I have seen God face to face,' he said, 'and have survived.'²

Now that very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but their eyes were prevented from recognising him. Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself. When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; but they pressed him to stay with them saying, 'It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised 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?'³

Where You Gonna Run To?

The disciples when they run away from the arrest of Jesus are simply responding in the way almost all of us would respond. The temptation is to take these passages and turn them into a justification for self-flagellation as we condemn our lack of faith and courage assuming that like the disciples we would abandon Christ. However, this is not necessarily what we are to understand from the account of the desertion of Jesus by his friends. In fact, Jesus foretold these things knowing that it would be necessary for the disciples to flee the reality of what was to happen in order that they could then truly embrace it in their own lives. It was first necessary for them to flee into the darkness of their own fear so that they could emerge from the darkness to witness and experience the light of the life of the resurrection. They are fleeing for fear of death and this is the very antithesis of what Jesus himself is doing having faced up to his own destiny – to die in order that he may live again and bring life for all. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus himself was afraid – so afraid that in Luke's account we read that he sweats blood⁴ – this is a real medical condition called hematomidrosis. In circumstances of great stress, such as facing death, tiny blood vessels can rupture and give the appearance of sweating blood. The reaction of the disciples then for us becomes an important metaphor – the need to confront our fear and flee into the darkness rather than from it. Of course it is true that one of the greatest symbols of the life of faith is that of light – Jesus is the light of the world⁵ and we are to walk in the light⁶. However, there is an ancient spiritual tradition within Christianity that acknowledges the need for us to confront the darkness, even enter into it, in order that we may learn from it and find God in the midst of it. For this reason, and in this sense, we, like the disciples must flee Jesus so that we might find him in the darkness. Another image of this is that of wrestling with God. In the passage above about Jacob we see that he confronts his own fear and wrestles the angel of the Lord, risking injury and even death, in order to receive a blessing. Wrestling and running are similar metaphors which help us to understand the need for us to confront our own doubts and fears in order to gain the blessing. Daniel Taylor, an English Professor at Bethel College in St Paul, Minnesota, quotes Simone Weil saying,

It seems certain to me that we can never resist God enough, if we do it from a pure regard for the truth. Christ loves those who prefer the truth, because before he is Christ he is the truth. If we turn away from him, however, to follow truth, we will not go far before walking into his arms again⁷.

Weil here is using *resist* in the sense of *wrestle* rather than rejection or defiance. She is not suggesting that we turn away from God in an act of defiance rather she is making the important point that, like Jacob, there will be times in our faith journey when we shall have to wrestle with God for the blessing. The idea she is conveying is that even as we *turn away* from Christ (or a false image of Christ) we will in fact be *walking into his arms again*. In my own effort to articulate this more than twenty years ago I wrote the following poem in my journal;

Lost and Found

Each time he's found he turns around
And he is gone, like a whole in water
He cannot be grasped, and all I asked
Is that I might know the great unknown.
But, unknowing is the food on which I've grown.
And still I hunger for the hunter
As he pursues me through the dark,
I chase the chaser even closer to my heart
And hope to face the truth in his face.
Sleeping, I am caught in his embrace.
I kiss, again he's gone and I'm the one
Who laughs to cry my prayer, "is anybody there?"
Too full to fill I'm empty still
And singing with angels is a meager thrill
Compared to touching his passing robe,
Or sensing his hand and taking hold.
For just a while I am a child
And dancing where the wind blows wild
I give myself to die in his arms,
Until again he slips away.
And so I live to love another day.⁸

This idea of turning away from Christ – (remember Forgetting Jesus?) – only to walk into his arms is expressed in David's majestic psalm 139;

Where shall I go to escape your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I scale the heavens you are there, if I lie flat in Sheol, there you are. If I speed away on the wings of the dawn, if I dwell beyond the ocean, even there your hand will be guiding me, your right hand holding me fast. I will say, 'Let the darkness cover me, and the night wrap itself around me,' even darkness to you is not dark, and night is as clear as the day.⁹

David is described as a man after God's own heart¹⁰ and yet he was also a man acquainted with both the darkness of God and the darkness of his own heart. He was a man unafraid of crying out to God acknowledging his own fear and doubt as he longed once again to sense the intimacy he once knew¹¹. It is into the darkness the disciples fled not knowing what to do or where to go as they wrestled with their own doubt and confusion. It was in this darkness that Christ was able to reveal himself as the risen Lord. In every case of an encounter with the risen Jesus he hides himself from them in order to reveal himself to them. One of the most enigmatic examples is the passage from Luke describing the disciples on the road to Emmaus. By all accounts they were dejected and confused wondering what it was all about when Jesus joins them out of the shadows. This journey is a journey through the darkness and when it becomes almost too dark to continue they plead with the stranger to remain with them. There in the murky darkness of the room where they were sharing bread and wine Jesus reveals himself before once again hiding himself – perhaps he has hidden himself in the very bread and wine they are left holding in their hands as their hearts burn within them.

Treasures of the darkness

These beautiful words from Isaiah may go some way toward explaining what it is that I am trying to say about the *via*

*negativa*¹²;

I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden wealth of secret places,
So that you may know that it is I,
The Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

Fleeing Jesus in this context is really and truly finding Jesus in as much as we can never really escape him. What we are often running away from is the truth or reality. T.S.Eliot was right when he said that *humankind cannot bear very much reality*.¹³ And yet that is the very thing that we are called to bear when Jesus invites us to become people of the truth as he is truth. Truth is reality (*aletheia*) and it was reality that the disciples were fleeing from when they left Jesus in the hands of his captors. Running from the reality of his death they run into the reality of their fear and confusion which is only ever found in the darkness. The necessary darkness where God can be found if we can but believe it. The darkness where the deepest treasure lies. Truth, says Jesus, or reality, is what sets us free¹⁴. But like Pilate we find ourselves saying, "Truth, what is that?"¹⁵

Whatever it is I get the feeling it's not what we really want to see, let alone confront. Our lives are not strong enough to bear too much reality – we think it would crucify us. Therefore, we construct all manner of elaborate facades around us in an attempt not only to avoid the truth, but also actually to shield us from its merciless blows. Whatever else the crucifixion is about it is surely about the consequences of confronting reality. If we were but brave enough to follow Christ and confront our own reality then it is likely that the cruel nails of truth will be driven into our hands and feet thus securing us to the cross, which is itself the harsh reality of death – mortality – the end. The crowning glory of our facing reality is full of thorns and our vision becomes blurred with blood. Truth, if we confront it, will only ever set us free by virtue of the fact that it will kill us – we have to be prepared to die to all the illusions we have constructed around our fragile lives in order to truly live. This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ - this is the way, the truth and the life.

In her book, 'Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology', Sallie McFague, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, says this;

The days of supposing we are free of finite limitations, of supposing we have some direct access to "Truth", that there might be words that correspond to "what is," that "clear and distinct ideas" can be many or very interesting – such a time is over (if it ever existed . . .) The most sensitive and perceptive poets, theologians, philosophers, and scientists have always known better. What we have and all that we have is the grid or screen provided by this metaphor and by that metaphor. The metaphor *is* the thing, or at least the only access that we . . . limited beings have to it. That such a situation leaves us feeling uneasy is an understatement. We grasp after certainty, after direct access to the way things "really are". . . . the acceptance of metaphorical language means also the acceptance of risk, of openendedness, of skepticism. To live [like this] is to live in faith and hope, not in the certainty of knowledge, but it is also, not incidentally, where Jesus' parables, with their images and stories, insist we must live.

I once entered a Christian bookshop, which was empty of any other customers. Sat at a small desk with a pile of books was none other than the great Malcomb Muggeridge. He was there for a book signing. It was only weeks before I myself was about to leave Manchester for Nottingham to begin my theological studies so I seized the opportunity to chat to him. I picked a book of his from the shelves, the cheapest I could find, and promptly asked him if he would sign it. I explained to him what I was about to do and asked if he might offer any pearls of wisdom, he screwed up his face in the way only he could and he began to write. When I looked at what he had written I smiled and politely bid him farewell. I wasn't that impressed to be honest, in fact I was a bit disappointed. It wasn't really until years later I appreciated what he had written and now today it is fundamental to my understanding of faith and theology,

Harold, always remember that theology is not an academic process – it is a drama!

And so where is all this leading? Good question. It's leading to an empty tomb and a hat full of questions that we can never answer with any degree of certainty. It's leading to a drama the impact of which has resonated around the whole world and still continues to enthrall and beguile.

Some years ago Joan and I witnessed throngs of people queuing for up to an hour at the National Gallery just for the chance to look at pieces of art that attempt to tell this story – the drama of the life, death and resurrection of the man Jesus whom they dared to call Christ. The drama carries as much power as ever it did but it is we, those of us

who call ourselves Christians and settle into our sure and certain faith, who are in danger of missing the point of the drama because for so many of us it is no longer that – instead it is a process, a formula, a discipleship course, a fast song or even a comfortable habit – a way of life. Maybe if we are brave enough to travel the road of the events that we shall be remembering in Holy week we will also allow ourselves to be brave enough to flee into the darkness with the disciples on Good Friday, and remain there through Saturday, in the hope (which is unseen which is why it is hoped for) that we might find God in the darkness – which after all is not darkness, for even the darkness is as light to God.

¹ Mark 14.50-52

² Genesis 32.25-32

³ Luke 24.13-16; 27-32

⁴ Luke 22.44

⁵ John 1.4,5; 12.46

⁶ 1 John 1.7

⁷ Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty - The Reflective Christian & The Risk of Commitment*. Simone Weil (b03.02.1909 d24.08.43) was a French philosopher, Christian mystic, and social activist. Albert Camus described her as The only great spirit of our time.

⁸ Hadge Hughes, Journal May 1995

⁹ Psalm 139.7-12

¹⁰ Acts 13.22

¹¹ see Psalms 13, 55, 89, 102 and many more which express David's heart as he wrestles with his own fear and self doubt.

¹² Also known as *negative theology* is so much as we have to acknowledge that we sometimes have to define God in terms of what we cannot say or know because of the complete otherness of the transcendent God – thus, images such as darkness, doubt, loss and failure become ways of finding faith through revelation in those times rather than ways of losing faith. C.S.Lewis in his book *Miracles*, advocates the use of negative theology when first thinking about God, in order to cleanse our minds of misconceptions (Forgetting Jesus). He goes on to say we must then refill our minds with the truth about God, untainted by mythology, bad analogies or false mind-pictures.

¹³ T.S.Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

¹⁴ John 8.32

¹⁵ John 18.38