

A HARD RESURRECTION

I was transfixed. I was standing in front of two paintings at a special exhibition in the National Gallery a few years ago. The paintings were both by the 16th century Italian artist Caravaggio, and they were both of the Supper at Emmaus, so vividly described by Luke. But there the similarity ended.

In the first painting, the one that's permanently in the National Gallery, the atmosphere is positive and joyful. The table is full of food; the bowl of fruit is almost falling off the table for us to catch. Jesus looks fit and healthy, not at all as if he'd been crucified three days ago. He's wearing rich-looking clothes of red and white. He's calmly blessing the food in that familiar way of his, so that the veil is falling from the disciples' eyes, and their amazement is palpable. 'I can't believe it... What's happening? Is this...? Could it be...?' And very soon Jesus will have gone, and they'll be leaping back to Jerusalem like men made mad.

The other painting is very different. It's dark. The meal is frugal – two bread rolls and a small jug of wine. Jesus' face is lined and pale, lit only on one side by a shaft of light. His clothes are dark too, and the hand that blesses this meagre fare is barely raised above the table. There's no glory here. Nobody's singing 'Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son.' This resurrection looks to have been hard work.

Now the reason for the difference between these paintings is probably that there were five years between the two, and in that time Caravaggio had been on the run from justice after he'd murdered someone in a pub brawl, a not uncommon kind of event in Caravaggio's turbulent life. He wanted to get back into Papal favour, and in the meantime he wasn't in a good place.

But for us, now, I wonder, which painting would we most identify with? We're having a hard time. We're locked down, aware of a hidden killer outside the door, a cruel random virus that prowls around seeking whom it may devour. It's changed our whole world more than any event since the last war. It's knocked the world off its hinges. Personally, millions of people have been, and are, going through nightmares. Economically, we'll be paying for this for years, if not decades.

If we're celebrating resurrection today – and we are – it's been hard work. There's none of what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace.' No triumphant journey from Galilee to glory; we've definitely had Gethsemane and Golgotha in between. As we look at Jesus in the second painting we can see (to borrow from TS Eliot) that it was 'hard and bitter agony.'

But it's here. Jesus is risen from the dead.

I was called into hospital one night to be with a middle-aged woman who was dying. Jean and her husband were faithful members of our church and I had travelled this hard road with them for some time. Of course Hugh was there at her side. In the early hours of the

morning Jean gave up the struggle and graciously left this life, leaving behind a large, empty, peaceful space. We sat together, Hugh and I, and prayed and talked. I stayed as long as it seemed helpful, but eventually I knew it was time to leave. As I stepped out of the hospital dawn was breaking. The mysterious light of that waking hour was stealing over the car park; the birds were picking out their best tunes and the air vibrated with promise. It was Easter morning. And I knew as surely as I knew my own name that Jean was secure in a Love far stronger than the ravages of death. She was in her own Easter garden, meeting her risen Lord.

A wise old cleric once said at a retreat I was on: 'Never let the sorrows of this world hide from you the joy of Christ risen.' We can try to do that, even in this very challenging time – especially in this challenging time. Or what is our faith worth? The risen Christ has been let loose in the world and is now at work, releasing and empowering people 'of all faiths and none' (as we say) to respond heroically and compassionately to the crisis we're in. What an eruption of goodwill we've seen in our communities! What a release of love, in practical action.

Christians are empowered by the Spirit of the living Jesus who, one quiet dawn in Jerusalem, walked away from a garden tomb, and cut the ribbon on a new world, a new creation where ultimately every tear will be wiped away and 'death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

A self supporting minister in the diocese of Oxford, an academic at the university, once sent me a poem which I use every Easter. It sees the resurrection from the extraordinary *viewpoint of the tomb* in which Jesus was buried. Here it is:

Ages before Jerusalem was founded
I was formed for this day.
God said, shall these sea-bones live?
I will sculpt me a tomb: a lime-white chamber
fit for a king.

I was ready when they brought him in:
bloody and broken, like a king from his last
battle. Dusk was falling. They hurried, careful.
So careful. They were brittle with pain.
They straightened him (legs, arms, head) in the niche;
stopped my mouth with a rock, and crept away.

We were quiet together.
He slept inside me. I cradled him,
like a child unborn. Outside,
Earth shuddered; the sun failed; stars shot like bolts
Through warring heavens.
I kept him safe

til he began to stir
like the child whose time has come.
The deep places of creation whispered,
Let there be light!
A mighty spasm shook the stone. I gaped.
He rose. For a moment
he stood facing the dawn, then he was gone.

Later
there would be angels, blazing-eyed
and docile, folding linen bandages.
There would be men and women, storms of grieving
suddenly stilled.
But first, as the sun rose,
there was just light and silence. A cave empty
and a world full of promises fulfilled.

In Caravaggio's second painting, hard as the resurrection had clearly been, there was also 'light and silence' in that moment of resurrection. A hard journey, but a new world being born. And an absolute promise, given later on a hillside that: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Christ **is** risen. He is risen indeed – alleluia!