

The most important thing

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he will be killed and after three days rise again. (Mk.8.31)

‘When I got to the age of sixty I said to myself ‘the most important thing that is going to happen is that you are going to die’. Gordon Rupp, a former Methodist President and distinguished Professor of Ecclesiastical History, begins a sermon with this sentence. The words were spoken by an old retired friend as they sat eating crumpets together. The sermon is entitled ‘Life’. Lent is the time of the year when we specifically ponder on life and death.

From the moment our life begins the clock of time ticks the years away towards death. Death unfortunately is not something which awaits us when we reach our three-score years and ten. Its shadow can fall on us at any time. A road accident? An unexpected diagnosis from the doctor who tells us we have only a few months to live?

Some months ago a distressed church member phoned to tell us that her grandson had been killed in Afghanistan. Death is ever present for all of us.

Jesus marches towards death. His face is resolute. He will not be distracted. He knows that in facing death, abundant life will be released. His death-denying disciples on the other hand are confused and afraid (Mk.10.32) as we would be. Lent calls us to face up to the inevitability of our own death. We are mortal and will die. We should therefore take stock of our lives.

In our Western culture of speed and choice many of us, with a multitude of tasks to complete, race through each day trying to catch up with ourselves. Moreover as one gets older every job seems to take longer. For those unemployed or those who sit idly around, the curse of unfulfilment eats away at their motivation, blighting their lives. The fact is, very few of us complete all the tasks we set ourselves or realise the dreams of our youth. The pain of unfulfilment is a feature of the human condition. The shadow of mortality raises the question of meaning. What did we set out to achieve? What have we done with our lives?

What did Jesus achieve? According to Mark, he was engaged in an ‘invasion-redemption’ mission and is presented as a ‘space invader’. It is no accident that the name ‘Jesus’ or ‘Saviour’ comes from a Hebrew root word for ‘space’ (*Yasha*). Following his baptism Jesus invades the wilderness turning it into a Garden of Eden, then follows a mission to village, town, countryside, sea, and city. At each stopping point he reclaims the space occupied by hostile powers. Demons are driven out, (1.25f), sin and sickness removed (2.9f), the oppressive religion of Scribe and Pharisee attacked (3.1f). Jesus is plundering the property of

the strong man, Beelzebul (3.25). The chaos waters of the deep are tamed (4.39f, 6.48f) and death is destroyed (5.38f).

Did Jesus have a sense of fulfilment? Certainly the beginning of his ministry was brilliant with its miracles and enthusiastic Galilean crowds. Mark describes this early part of his mission at breakneck speed. Jesus rushes about. No time to eat. But things slow down. The march to death has begun. Time to think. Assess. He has failed with the religious leaders. What of the disciples? They are his biggest disappointment. On their last evening together, Philip asks Jesus a question which revealed that he had understood nothing. Jesus replies 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?' (Jn.14.9). Even though we have the triumphant affirmation 'it is accomplished' his mission appears to have failed. If the kingdom dream is to be realised then the disciples have to fulfil it. His resurrection meant that they could and would! We are called to be disciples and continue that mission.

What then of our achievements? What of your sense of fulfilment or unfulfilment? What of your failures and successes? Thomas Merton, the 20th century Catholic contemplative and spiritual guide of many, captures these questions within his understanding of the resurrection body of Christ.

'My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labours is not my own; for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my own achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievement and failures with the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time. It is seen above all, in my integration in the mystery of Christ'

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