Revelation, Redemption, Relation

April 19th, 2020

2nd Sunday of Easter

The resurrection of Jesus is an invasion of life into the realm of death. It is a joyfully therapeutic apocalypse. As one scholar has worded it: “Like trying to capture light by bringing it into darkness, Christ filled death with life” (Jonathan Pageau, “Jonah—Resurrecting the Body and Saving the City”, *Orthodox Arts Journal*, May 23, 2014). While we were whitewashed tombs, Christ poured life into us through his rising and gifting of the Holy Spirit. The word *revenant* is a beautiful word, when taken out of its ghostly and morbid folklore context. It literally means one who has returned. And indeed, Jesus returned to his disciples, his friends, his new sacred family—and thus made us into sacred revenants—pilgrims making their way back home to God through the anagogy of redemption and sanctification. Thomas encounters the revenant Christ in a way that completely illustrates this pilgrimage of holy revenants—from the darkness of doubt and the absence of Christ to the light of recognition and repentance in the presence of Christ. In his encounter with Thomas, Jesus manifests the 3 R’s of the gospel *kerygma*: revelation, redemption, and relation (for other versions of this cf. Stanley N. Gundry, “The Three Rs of Moody’s Theology”, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/moodys-theology>; Trip Kimball, “The Three Rs of the Gospel”, <https://www.word-strong.com/thinking-out-loud/the-3-rs-of-the-gospel> ).

The gospel is revelation. God is revelatory in the sense that He wants to disclose Himself to humanity. He has done this through the scriptures, through the Law and the prophets, through visions, through nature, through angels and miracles, but most importantly, through the Risen Christ (Hebrews 1). Jesus appeared to a gathering of the disciples, illustrating a social or communal aspect: “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side” (John 20:19-20). Then, he reveals himself to Thomas personally, reflecting the importance of our individual significance: “But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’” (John 20:24-27). God does not discourage questions or even healthy doubt (Mark 8:27-30; Acts 17:11, John 4:1). Jesus had his moment in the Garden of Gethsemane; he was tested in every way and can relate to our struggles (Hebrews 4:15). What God does not want is for anyone to be left out of the joy and illumination of revelation; thus he indulges the request of Thomas and wants Thomas to believe. Through his doubt, paradoxically, Thomas also crafted some beautiful theology that affirms free will, free conscience, the bodily nature of resurrection, and faith working with reason. All of which Jesus affirms by allowing Thomas to examine the evidence, to see the glorified body of the Lord, and exclaim: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). For the revelation of the Risen Christ is explosively apocalyptic; it pronounces possible all that we thought was impossible. Not only were the apostles to be *martyrs*, that is witnesses, of this Risen Christ, this Lord and God who wants nothing less than to share his holiness, his joy, his peace, his eternity with all—even future pilgrims who were not present at this historic event will know God. Thus, Jesus declares: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29). As St. Symeon the New Theologian sang in one of his hymns:

Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Spirit of God.

Do not say that it is possible to be made whole without Him.

Do not say that one can possess Him without knowing it.

Do not say that God does not manifest Himself to man.

Do not say that men cannot perceive the divine light, or that it is impossible in this age!

Never is it found to be impossible, my friends.

On the contrary, it is entirely possible when one desires it.

(*Hymn 27*, 125-132, St. Symeon the New Theologian).

The revenant Jesus reveals the God who reveals.

The revenant Jesus also reveals the God of redemption. In beholding the Risen Christ, Thomas sees his own *telos,* the destination of his own anagogical pilgrimage that is just beginning. For he was present when Jesus told Martha: “‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25). The one who raised Lazarus has himself died and come back, a journey which reframes the whole journey of human existence. The wounds that Thomas investigates were the wounds that killed Jesus—but now these wounds are signs of the healing, of the rising up into glory of the One who has conquered death. God is redemptive, for the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of our redemption and transformation into the divine life itself. Thus, Paul says: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16); “Godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come…For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:8-10). When we look at the Risen Christ, like Thomas, we should see what we are to become—that is the goal, the endgame that the Almighty God has given to broken humanity because of his grace. This is celebrated in the oldest creeds—The Old Roman Symbol and the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe…in the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting”; “I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” To become like Christ—not just morally, not just philosophically, but bodily and spiritually—this is our end. Consequently, John would later write: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3). One might recall the confusion and fear the disciples heard when discussing salvation after the rich young man refused to follow Jesus: “They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’” (Mark 10:26-27). With the *immortal* God all things are possible.

The Risen Christ also reveals the relational nature of God. This is not abstract; there is a great sense of intimacy; as Jesus tells Thomas: “Reach out your hand and put it in my side” (John 20:27). It is a culmination of all that Christ has taught so far: the love summarized in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), in the greatest commandments for us to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-30), in the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son (Luke 10:25-37; Luke 15:11-32), and in the parable of the vine and branches in which we are organically linked to God and to each other through Christ (John 15:1-17). Jesus was renowned for healing people with his divine touch; Thomas wants to touch the divine again, even if it is the wounds that were inflicted on the cross. Our intimacy with Christ gives us peace because Christ is our home, the One in whom we abide (John 14-15). Returning to his friends from death into life, Jesus says: “Peace be with you” (John 20:26). This is the *Pax Christi*—the overarching peace that comes only from God. It is not the temporary peace of a treaty, a social contract or an economic development. The world has had any number of those for millennia, and they have done nothing to conquer and eradicate the basic existential questions of sin, sorrow, pain and death. What Christ gives is victorious and absolute. It is at once the apocalyptic peace that will swallow up all evil and darkness to restore earth to heaven as well as the interior peace granted through the Holy Spirit. The true life of peace is life in Christ, who promises this to the disciples. And not only does he share it with the disciples; he commissions them to share it with the world: “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:20-22). Indeed, the work of following Christ consists in being holy revenants carrying the Holy Spirit, cultivating the peace of the Paraclete, and being ambassadors of this peace to the world. This is what the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them…So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5). The resurrection is, if nothing else, a grand reunion of humanity with God. As Irenaus of Lyons once said: God has "become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (Irenaus, *Against Heresies,* V. Preface).

God is a God of revelation, relation and redemption. All of these are interwoven, just as the persons of the Trinity are interwoven into One loving communion, for God is love (1 John 4:8).