

Recognition

Among the definitions of the word “recognition” the dictionary includes: *the knowledge or feeling that someone present has been encountered before.*

I think I noted in an earlier essay this spring how, throughout the Gospel stories of the resurrection, Jesus’ disciples failed – initially - to recognize him. Mary Magdalene thinks she sees a gardener. The disciples on the road to Emmaus see him as a stranger in town. The people hiding out in the upper room initially see a ghost, not Jesus. Thomas is convinced that after his burial there remains no Jesus to recognize anyway. And the seven disciples who later go fishing see him vaguely on a distant shoreline as a distraction from a long night of failure to catch even one fish.

Could this emphasis on their failure to recognize Jesus underscore the fact that his followers never fully recognized him *even when he was alive* – throughout their journeys with him through Galilee and other locations? They seem never to have been sure about his message – other than that he came to “restore the kingdom of Israel” in the manner of ancient King David – to make of Israel “a nation once again” of universal dominion – a very nationalist, ethnocentric, journalistic dream. That’s what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus expressed when they said: *We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel* – to change the politics of the world.

They had yet to comprehend that his words and deeds were intended to *recreate* our world, as intended by a gracious, forgiving, and deeply personal Source; to change it into a world of mutual grace amid so much diversity; a world of profound faith, hope and love – like a tidal wave carrying us “God knows where”. What prevented them from recognizing that, which was so far from nationalist, ethnocentric, anthropocentric or journalistic? Well, it was traceable to their everyday environment, what “history” had taught them - that that’s not how the world works! Force, will power, self-interest were preferred – violence: often called “justice” – Cain kills his brother Abel - is the norm.

It’s only by way of these post-crucifixion visitations of Jesus, after his disciples’ failure to recognize him, that suddenly a Pentecost happens – a breath, a breeze, the words: *Receive the Holy Spirit* – that they begin to awaken into a dynamic community that included the likes of a now expansive St. Peter and whirlwind St. Paul (once so severe), who could say that *whereas he once saw things distorted as in a mirror, now he could see everyone face to face; we start out knowing partially, but then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.* We begin to recognize things we failed to see before. And it is at this point that the Gospels we read *begin to be written* in a way that unveils a fuller, gracious, unforgettable recognition of what we now call the Christ event.

And who in these resurrection narratives is the first to recognize Jesus as risen from his grave? It’s Mary Magdalene. At first she sees him as a gardener, a stranger. But then he says: “Mary”, and suddenly things get personal, on the verge of touch. What does this teach us? That maybe if we could just “get personal”, remove the disguises, we might find ourselves in the world as it was meant to be – wonderfully, mysteriously familiar.

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