

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 19 APRIL 2009

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John 20: 19-31

"Corporate Spirituality: Letting-go New Life"

"Suppressed grief suffocates." Ovid, *Tristia*, book V

"Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break"
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV, iii

"human kind
Cannot bear too much reality."
T S Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', in *Four Quartets*

Introduction

In our story in John 20: 19-31, it is Sunday evening. Three days have passed since the execution of Jesus. A group of Jesus' followers hide behind locked doors. We are told, they are afraid of the Jews. This fear signals that there is much more going on. Gerard Arbuckle in his book, *Grieving for Change*, tells us that this "much more" is grief. He suggests that when a person or a group experiences loss, grief emerges in various forms: "Sadness, sorrow, confusion and even guilt" (11). He adds, "few people or organisations can relate to the unknown, the unpredictable or chaos without feeling anxiety, apprehension, or fear." (Arbuckle, 19)

So here they are, locked away in this room in the process of grieving. Their leader has been unjustly executed. They have also betrayed and denied him, and so carry guilt and failure. They find themselves in chaos: they have lost their leader, their community, their values and tradition.

They had left everything to join the Jesus movement. Now, their newly acquired identity and meaning is shattered. "Grief is the cost we must pay for loving. We can become so attached to some work, group, or person that when separation occurs we feel that something of ourselves has been destroyed." (Arbuckle, 19)

How will they emerge from this process? Will they become defensively and anxiously over-attached to the Jesus they knew, and to the God of the Old Testament commandments, and to their own interpretation of his teaching? Or will they **let go** in such a way that **new life** will arise?

1. There is an anecdotal story about a congregation, in Amsterdam in 1952, which was over-attached to their own interpretation of the Christian faith, which Ernst Kasemann shares in his book *Jesus Means Freedom*. One Sunday severe storms and floods required that this congregation go out and strengthen the dykes if they were to survive. They believed they should honour the Sabbath and never work on a Sunday. The church council told the pastor that they must obey God's will, even if it meant death. God, being all-powerful, would save them. Their duty was obedience. When the pastor suggested that Jesus himself broke the Sabbath on occasions, one venerable older man said that he had always suspected "that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal". (16) Kasemann concludes that the "liberal" Jesus "was a cause of offence" to orthodox Jews, his first disciples and the whole church

down to our time, due to his peculiar freedom. (17) But I want to add that such rigid over-attachment to our own way of believing and doing things is also psycho-social, being related to the way we have responded to loss, grief and change.

Loss and change produce contradictory impulses. "[T]here is the urge to cling tenaciously to what is lost and ... what gave meaning to one's life; on the other hand, there is the need to rebuild a way of life or new relationships in which what was positive from the past is maintained or even revitalised". (Arbuckle, 22)

2. Gerard Arbuckle turns to cultural anthropology, particularly the anthropologist Victor Turner, to gain insights into the process of grieving. His particular concern is to understand grief and to support religious communities experiencing loss of past traditions and forms of worship in changing circumstances.

Victor Turner has taught us that the grieving process is a social drama. For him society is a process "created over and over again out of the effort to resolve the tensions between order and creativity." (Arbuckle, 32) At the points when a group or society experience loss or significant change, the social drama is a key ritual. Normal activities and life are temporarily stopped. "The group is forced to reflect on its own behaviour in the light of its foundational values" (Arbuckle, 32), even to question their relevance. The social drama has four phases: a breakdown in social relationships, a crisis, redressive action, and reintegration to a new/normal life (or schism). "The crisis ... produces chaos, senselessness, or meaninglessness, and this can be a most terrifying experience." (32f) The redressive process is about people needing "to discover meaning in what is happening, and to do this they are forced to reflect on fundamental principles or myths that could guide them in resolving this crisis." (33)

3. I suggest that our story in John 20: 19-31 is John's version of the social drama.

The **first stage** involved the events leading to the death of Jesus, which produce a breakdown in social relationships. The leader of this religious social movement is unjustly tried and executed. His community is implicated. They are social outcasts. They grieve over the death of their movement, the loss of their leader. They hide in this locked room.

Then, **the second stage**, the crisis, which is overwhelming. Nothing is normal anymore. They have no roles, status or identity, that is, they exist in a liminal state. Anxiety is high. Guilt and failure colour their grieving. Depression would have existed.

A brief word about depression. Depression is an essential stage of grief, loss and powerlessness. It is vital to stay with it creatively. It is an essential stage of grieving, in which we experience feelings of emptiness, chaos and misery. It is important because it does not deny or avoid the loss. We need support in this, but if we stay in this place of self-emptying to learn about ourselves, it is healthy. Sit, stay, listen, and learn. Of course, prolonged or chronic depression requires us to seek professional help. However, it is important to gain insight into what our depression is saying. We all go through it!

Part of the crisis phase is honest anger and frustration. Thomas, while seeming to say he wants objective proof about Jesus, may also be transferring his failure onto Jesus and projecting it into anger.

Thirdly, the **redressive** (to remedy or set right) or **reflexive** (looking back at ourselves from a different place) stage of the drama emerges, where resolution and new meaning evolve. Jesus stands in their midst. This appearance is not a rational attempt to prove his resurrection. It is

theology. The identity of Jesus is re-defined. He lives on in a new way. His message is re-defined. His death has marked him and his movement. Here it begins again.

The first act of “setting right” is about relationship, compassion and forgiveness: his words that deal with the grief, anxiety, betrayal and fear. “Peace be with you!” Jesus does not avoid or deny failure. His next reflexive act is to redefine himself and God. Divinity is now marked with human wounds and unjust suffering.

The response of the disciples is joy. They are redefined in this act. They are not failures, they are the forgiven. They are not rejected. They are the loved and included. He takes Thomas’ anger and offers him Peace. Their friend and leader is alive and among them, even in faith. But they are not the same! They are redefined!

Fourthly, the stage of reintegration. Differences are resolved and they have a new identity, source of power and mission. Reintegration is actually transformation in John’s story. They do not return to the past! They are now entrusted with the mission of sharing the grace and love of God given to all people.

Jesus empowers them by giving them the Spirit. This is Pentecost for John. It means they have an intimate relationship with the divine. That is, they share the passion of God, one which seeks to heal and give life to others, not to create exclusive religious tradition!

4. Letting go new life! Allowing oneself and one’s community to experience the process of grief which loss and change produces. This alone can lead to new life! In addition, it can be messy, but renewing and liberating new life.

This is our human journey, we learn from the Swedish movie, *As it is in Heaven*. It received a best foreign film Oscar nomination in 2005.

What Daniel, a Swedish world-renowned conductor, only ever wanted since he was seven was to express his dream “to create music that would open people’s hearts”. Yet, everything around him seemed to conspire to sabotage sincere human passion. While playing Vivaldi on his violin when he is seven a group of school bullies beat him senseless. As he practices Mendelssohn when he is 14, he looks out the window to see his mother tragically hit by a car in the street below. His own heart has completely worn out, the doctor informs him, when he collapses while conducting a concert at the age of 40.

Loss and change have marked his whole life. To this point, it seems to me, music may have been comforting his heart, supporting his process of loss, and had not as yet opened his own heart to live more fully with himself and others. So he chooses to return to his small home village in Sweden, where he unknowingly begins to process the grief he has accumulated. He becomes the new cantor in the protestant church in the village.

“Daniel doesn't bargain for the wasp nest he staggers into. He runs into religious fervour, much of it hypocritical, especially from the respected town pastor. Emotional and physical scars abound, as Daniel witnesses spousal abuse, betrayal, discrimination and repression.” (Mario Tarradell, *Dallas Morning News*, 05.02.08)

Yet, his honesty and passion to open people to the healing power of voice, group work and real, caring community produces a social drama enabling people to process their grief, fear and anger. All communities carry grief that has grown in individual and group loss and change. The more we

suppress unprocessed grief, the angrier the contained hornets become. However, all communities release the tension, and the Christ figures, such as Daniel, can play cathartic roles in their own healing and the healing of others.

One example only. Lena, a young woman, through the trust and honesty built in the choir community, is finally able to express her bitter disappointment with the members of the choir. They had known that their former village doctor she had been in love with for two years had a family and children back in the city. Her grief and anxiety over their betrayal were finally given the right conditions in which they could be revealed. Daniel had led the choir into a strength of life to enable it to have the resilience to deal with such conflict and hurt.

Conclusion

Gerard Arbuckle notes that John Bowlby suggests that individuals and groups enter a positive process of grieving and mourning when they “accept both that a change has occurred in the external world and that [the individual or the group] is required to make corresponding changes in [their] internal, representational world and to reorganise, and perhaps reorient, [their] attachment behaviour accordingly”. (12)