

Easter III (4th May 2019)

Zeph.3:14-21; Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19

The Traitor and the Killer

Two long readings, one about St. Peter, one about Saul who became Paul. Together, you could call them the story of the Traitor and the Killer.

Perhaps you think *Traitor* too strong a label to hang on Peter. It was after all Judas who did the actual betraying of Jesus. All Peter did was save himself – tell a lie when he had to, deny knowing Jesus in order not to end up the same way as Jesus. Fearful, yes; even cowardly – but traitorous seems a bit harsh. But you, of course, are not Peter. *Peter* will have judged himself *very* harshly, as people often do. How could I have done that? To deny my best friend, to deny my King? To let him die alone, to abandon him like that? Oh yes, Traitor is the word Peter would have used. What a wreck of a man I am. The good in me is dead. I have come to end of the road, and I have failed.

Killer, though, is just a statement of fact about Saul. Saul, killed Christians. He'd stood there that morning in Jerusalem as the stones thudded into Stephen's skull, and he'd approved of the murder. And now he was off to Damascus, if necessary, to do the same. Let's do him the credit of believing he hoped it *wouldn't* be necessary. Maybe he hoped a bit of fear and intimidation would do the trick, would bring the heretics back into line. But, if necessary, to keep the faith, to save Israel, to honour God ... well, yes, let the stones be cast. Saul wouldn't have called himself a Killer; he'd have called what he did justice, righteousness, grim necessity. But that's what he was: Killer. He didn't know it yet, but what a wreck of a man he was. The good in him was dead. He had come to the end of the road, and he had failed.

And what happens to the Traitor and the Killer, to the two failed men at the end of their roads is that Jesus comes to meet them.

To the Traitor he comes by a charcoal fire – just like the fire that burned back in the High Priest's courtyard that dark night. And he asks three times – like the High Priest's servants did – 'Peter, do you love me?' It's as if Peter is being walked through his disaster all again. But here's the thing: it's not to rub his nose in it, not to press him down into his failure. It's to say, look Peter: out of your great failure I will bring something new. You will love me, and you'll feed my sheep, and you will truly become the Rock I always said you will be. Your failure doesn't end you. It's part of you, yes. We don't forget it, we don't ignore it and pretend it never happened. But it doesn't kill you. It's part of a bigger story now: the story of how I, Jesus, turn around failures and disasters, how I take weak, fearful, treacherous people and make them the prince of apostles.

To the Killer he comes in a blinding flash that cuts through all the pretence, all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men – all that fine talk of keeping the faith, saving Israel, honouring God. Saul, Saul why are you hurting me? Hear Saul, hear the stones thudding into

the flesh, cracking the bone ... Saul, they're thudding into God. You're not on God's side, Saul. You're not the righteous one. You're just a killer. You're everything God isn't. But here's the thing: this is said not said to destroy Saul, to pour out vengeance upon him. There is a sense indeed in which an old life comes to an end here. Think of that name change from Saul to Paul: it means that his old way of being dies on that road. But the key thing is that a new life begins. All that zeal, all that ferocity, all that devotion to Israel and the Law goes into a bigger story now: the story of how I Jesus, turn around thugs and killers, how I take people who are filled with hate and violence and make them the champions of my all-embracing love.

The Traitor and the Killer: it's the same story. Men who have come to the end of the road, men who have wrecked themselves suddenly find that their wrecking is not the end. Their wrecking is not the end because whatever they have done, whatever ruin they have driven themselves into, there is always Jesus. There is always Jesus, who on his Cross plunged into the deepest darkness so He could fill it with light – so He could be with the wrecks and turn them around, use them for love, fill them with love. Because of his Cross and Resurrection, no-one is doomed. Not the traitor, not the killer, and not you.

Think of it: have you wrecked your life? Have you come to the end of the road? Are there things you have done which, like Peter, you cannot bear to think about, which have robbed you forever of the person you wanted to be, hoped you were? Are there things you do which, like Paul, you have to dress up and disguise as something else, something noble, because if you really looked at them coldly, clearly you'd see them for the horror they are? Well, your worst sin is not the end of the road, because in Jesus the story is always bigger and the story ends in life, and joy, and peace. There is *nothing* you can do, no way in which you can wreck yourself so radically, so comprehensively, so finally that God in Jesus cannot meet you in the darkness and bring you home.

That's what believing in the Resurrection means. It's not just believing that on the third day the women went to the tomb and it was empty because God raised Jesus from the dead. That is just *half* of the Resurrection – an absolutely vital, necessary, factual half, but just half nonetheless. The half *outside* us. But the other half, the other absolutely vital, necessary, factual half is the half *inside* us – when we know the resurrection as something real within, as the power of newness, as the thing which takes the most dead parts of us and gives them a future full of hope. Resurrection – half outside, half inside. Just like – *exactly like* – the water of baptism, or the bread and the wine at this service. Things outside, things you can touch and see. But things which unleash a power within, a power which will bring you to glory.

I believe in the resurrection of the dead, we'll say in a moment in the Creed. Say it, and think of Jesus and his tomb of course. But also, say it for yourselves and for the world – for the way in our wreckage has been met, transformed, raised. We are part of a bigger story, the great story of Jesus, crucified and risen – and that story ends in glory. Which is why we sing Hallelujah, and thanks to be God. Amen.

Peter Waddell