

Life, Death and Transformation

A Sermon on Easter Sunday

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‘Christ is risen!’ we are enjoined to say to our fellow brothers and sisters in the morning of Easter Sunday. And they reply, ‘He is risen indeed.’ However, some words and expressions are like icebergs: they hide much more meaning than they reveal at the surface.

The verb ‘to rise’ means come to life again, come or go up, grow upwards, ascend, soar. When we go up in a high rising building our perspective changes. On the ground level we are under the impression that everything is separated from everything else. The perspective from the height changes that. Astronauts that traveled around the orbit of the earth, like Yuri Gagarin, have testified to that. From those great heights Gagarin said: ‘The earth is blue.’ He did not say Russia is blue, or that America and Europe are blue. For the first time to a human being that unique perspective was granted: from up there religions differences, social classes, political boundaries became utterly insignificant. The only reality was the all-pervading oneness of the earth, of life.

Many people in the world see religion as nothing but sentimentality, an exercise in credulity. Voltaire made this view famous with his well-known expression ‘Man created God in his own image.’ Although the growing number of emotion-based “churches” is a fact which continues to give Christianity a bad press, particularly among thinking people, it is also true that the core of the great religious traditions in the world remains perennially significant. At the very heart of a truly religious life there is an untranslatable experience: life is seen as an undivided wholeness.

The central mystery of the Easter drama is about the horror and the glory of being human. True religion is not a ride in the park and is not meant for the fainthearted. It is for those who endure to the end. The paradox of Easter stares at us all, year after year: how can the Son of Man immerse himself into unspeakable suffering and death without reactions, and come out of it only to teach his own and the world that there is a glorious life which untouched by the sting of death and the thorns of suffering?

The Gnostic doctors in Alexandria, the early Church fathers, the medieval saints and the Christian mystics found the answer to that paradoxical question: there is life in death and death in life. Living and dying are essentially one and the understanding of this timeless truth leads to immortality, to that spiritual height to which William Blake may have soared when he wrote: ‘All that lives is Holy.’

St. Paul (1Cor.15:36) addressed the same mystery: ‘But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die.’ Easter thus reveals death as mystery of transformation. As Jalaluddin Rumi, perhaps the greatest mystical poet of the Islamic world, wrote: ‘If you die before you die, you shall not die when you die.’ Luke also asks a similar question: ‘Why seek ye the living among the dead?’ (24:5)

The above different teachers have put before us a reality of which we cannot easily escape if we want to be true to the depth of our tradition. One way of putting it is to say that most of the contents of our consciousness are kept artificially alive by our self-importance and self-interest. Our Teacher and Master has, by his lofty example, shown us that such contents – essentially the ‘me’ – should be allowed to die, naturally and effortlessly. This profound teaching requires further investigation.

We are all, whether we are aware of it or not, prompted by attractions and repulsions. There are people whom we like and feel attracted to their company and there are others whom we may intensely dislike and would never be in their company. Thus attractions and repulsions become the breeding ground for every manifestation of aggression and violence. Yet both attraction and repulsion arise from a sense of personal self, an ‘I’ which feels always apart from the wholeness of life. As long as this strong sense of self prevails one cannot enter the depth and mystery of the Easter teaching, which points to the enduring reality of an endless life, a sacred wholeness, an existence which is suffused by a love which knows no beginning and no end. In the death of self there is immortality, oneness with God’s unending life and consciousness.

Bishop Leadbeater, in his book *The Hidden Side of Christian Festivals*, summed up in his objective style, the mystery-drama of Easter, showing that it is indeed a summon for our own connection with the deepest Spirit within us:

We must suffer with Him all the sorrow and the pain of this past week, a veritable crucifixion of all that seems to the man worth having; but he who endures to the end, he who passes through the test as he should, for him the glory of Easter is to be revealed, and he will gain the victory which makes him more than man, which raises him to the level of the Christ Spirit.