

Easter 3C, 18th April, 2010
John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-6
The Compost of Our Lives

My latest everyday life decision was: a compost bin or worm farm? Bunnings is so seductively attractive that I had to work hard not to buy both. The worm farm won. I pop in my vegie scraps, the worms digest them, and expel it all in liquid form. Do you know, I get about a litre each week of this wonderful rich worm wee that makes the most fabulous fertilizer.

So think about compost for a moment – the stuff that’s not wanted, that we want to discard, not good enough to use or eat, becomes the rich soil from which healthy flowers and vegies and fruit grow.

And so to today’s gospel. It’s not really a leap from compost to fishing and the resurrected Christ. Looking at Peter in particular, this is a story about the compost of our lives.

The disciples

The disciples were a bit all over the place. Jesus had died, destroying their hopes and dreams, so it seemed. Then –he was risen. Resurrected. Alive and with them. Well, sort of. Not quite the same. Unpredictable in his appearances. Even a little scary –appearing through locked doors and the like.

According to John’s account, the disciples return to Galilee. And go fishing – back to their old lives and work. Then, by the Sea of Tiberius, the disciples are confronted by the resurrected Jesus. They don’t recognise him at first. And then, it’s as if, for them, there’s a coming full circle. Déjà vu; this has happened before. This is where it all started from: on the same shore of Galilee, going about this same work of fishing, hearing the same voice of a person then a stranger to them, calling “Follow me”. There’s the same eeriness – as they had experienced before - of an unrecognized Jesus getting these fishermen to cast their nets again for a overwhelming catch of fish.

There’s some thought in academic circles that this story is an add-on to John’s gospel, and that John has taken the story from early in Luke’s Gospel and re-used it in a resurrection setting. But as a resurrection appearance story, it has huge impact and meaning, and fits. The disciples, with memories still fresh of the terror, betrayal and shame around Jesus’ death, with all their uncertainty and confusion right alongside and jumbled up with their resurrected hope about this Jesus, dead but alive again – these disciples have come back to their beginnings, to the obscurity of Galilee, back to the old security and familiar territory and familiar work. And Christ comes to them, unexpected and uninvited, un-threatening and forgiving, somehow converging the past with the present.

But this old life can’t be the same again; the way they see the world has changed; the experience of Jesus in their lives, dead and now alive, changes everything.

For Simon Peter, this sense of coming full circle, being taken back to old ground, is even more particular, more striking – and more painful, in the revisiting of past shame and failure. For here on the shore of the lake is a charcoal fire. Recall that this would only be a short time – weeks at the most - since that other charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest on the

day of Jesus' crucifixion; the charcoal fire with which Peter was warming himself when he denied being a disciple of Christ. Around *that* charcoal fire, Peter denied Christ three times. Matthew's Gospel records Peter as weeping bitterly when the full realization of his denial of Jesus hit home at the crowing of the rooster. Peter never got the chance to say "sorry".

Around *this* charcoal fire, on the shores of the lake, Jesus asks Peter three times "do you love me?" Peter responds with an emphatic "yes" three times. No denials now. Jesus hands on to Peter the mantle of tending his sheep, then the words, as before: "follow me". And notice he doesn't ask for a "sorry" from Peter.

I wonder how that was for Peter, as he realizes Jesus' forgiveness, as he realizes Jesus' trust and love in a setting that mirrors his earlier denials.

There's no hint here of Jesus rubbing Peter's nose in the shambles of his past failures; there's no recrimination here – on the contrary, the picture is one of a tenderly loving Jesus. Not a Jesus brushing off the past as bitter experience, or pushing the disciples to new things, new places, new ministries as if the past hadn't happened; it's rather as if Jesus is holding out one hand to the broken past, saying: 'let's not pretend that these things didn't happen; let's not pretend that God will only take the good and use that; let's not pretend that all that happens with past sin is that it is forgiven, then buried and forgotten. Where we go to in the future, where *my* resurrected life draws *you* into new life: this is built on the past – this is the place we start from, the place where I called you, these discomfiting and even shameful memories, together with all the good - these are the realities that become the building blocks for new life, for the futures into which you hear my call afresh. And I am standing with you in this place; standing with you in the memories'.

Building on our memories

Can we hear Jesus saying something like that to us, at those times when we revisit old shameful memories; the things we've tossed into the compost bin of life?

There's few of us that don't have old shames, old hurts that we hope are left behind us. Things we would rather forget about, things we would rather leave dead and buried. We don't want them dragged to the surface. We can acknowledge that God makes positive use of the sin and events and experiences of people's lives, and we can be encouraged by stories that demonstrate this. Yet we can be unsure about whether this is the case for us. There's still a little voice inside for many of us that wants to continue to accuse ourselves – "ah, but that thing I did is too awful; too irredeemable; it's way past the pale". Rowan Williams expresses this far more eloquently than I can. He says:

"With some memories, it is unthinkable that the grace of God should be able to do anything with them; they seem irredeemable.

Our temptation is to try to shut (these) away from the eye of God and from our own consciousness. But Christ continues gentle and relentless. His light must make its way into every corner, and we must be ready to turn to it.

Being aware of our memories in God's presence is, of course, part of the prayer of confession. The hard thing is to make it part of our prayer of

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thanksgiving too: in the sense of being ready always to acknowledge before God what we are and therefore what we have been, and at the same time bless God that his grace makes opportunities out of all our sin and unhappiness. This is what the apostle Paul does, in joy and amazement, time and again, recollecting that he was a persecutor, with martyr's blood on his hands, and yet knowing from that persecutor, God made an apostle.

Risen life in and with Christ is now, entirely fresh, full of what we could never have foreseen or planned; yet it is built from the bricks and mortar, messy and unlovely, of our past. God is faithful: it is his hand that will uncover in all our experiences the golden thread of his covenant love, and so point us to a future where our memories can be healed and transfigured. Our earth, our dull and stained lives, these are the living stones of God's new Jerusalem.¹

The challenge

And so to finish:

Jesus extends both his forgiving love and an invitation to us to intentionally bring our dark memories into his transforming light. As discarded veggie scraps become nutrient compost that feeds our gardens and brings forth magnificent flowers and healthy, abundant fruit, so the parts of our lives that we would otherwise discard can become the foundations for our own and others' transformations. But this is not just about personal healing or personal redemption. It's not just about what God might do for my life, for my past and my pain. This new life, rising on the ashes of our pasts, germinating from the compost of our pasts, isn't about ourselves. This is about God taking the shame of the past and transforming it into new things, into new life, and into a mission response.

Jesus, with one hand on Peter's past and one on his future, commissioned him: "feed my sheep". "Follow me". Serve my people, build my kingdom. Move on from the past. And so the call is for all of us. How are you responding?

¹ Rowan Williams *Open to Judgement*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994 p.79-80

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