

## RESURRECTION HUMILITY

Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist  
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 5 May 2019

Avengers Endgame is one almighty film. Huge in every sense: 3 hours long, multiple characters and storylines, A list actors everywhere, and an enormous final battle between the goodies and baddies, special effects on a scale hard to grasp. Iron Man, Spider Man, the Incredible Hulk, Captain American, Thor – these superheroes are all characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. There are many others too and sooner or later they are fighting baddies. It's a lot of fun and the punch ups go something like this. Super-villain punches superhero first, "hero punches back, hero's punches appear to be more effective until, oh no, villain's punches seem to get stronger and hero struggles to get his punches on target. Hero, thankfully, regroups and lands some even strong punches, which almost defeat villain, until, against all the odds, villain discovers the power of even strong punches and punches hero to within a millimetre of his life until hero, miraculously, finally is rejuvenated and delivers even more ineffably powerful punches. And wins." <sup>1</sup> As I said it's a lot of fun.

Last Sunday evening the cinema was full, like cinemas around the world. Over \$1.2 billion dollars in its opening weekend. One almighty film. The Marvel Cinematic Universe isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it has captured the imagination of a lot of people. Big, witty, violent, good overcoming evil, justice defeating the forces of darkness.

Many Christians approach faith in the same way. "Thine be the glory, risen conquering son. Endless is the victory, thou o'er death has won." "The strife is o'er, the battle done; now is the victor's triumph won" Bishop Graeme told us to leave out a line in a Christmas carol because it is unorthodox. Some of our Easter hymns deserve the same treatment: lines about triumph, victory, conquering. Jesus was a trouble-maker, he didn't shy away from speaking truth to power, he was not conflict-averse. That is why he was crucified by the Roman authorities. But he deliberately chose the path of non-violence. "Blessed are the peacemakers", not blessed at the warmongers. Our need to win runs so deep that we project that onto our Lord and Saviour. Our lust for victory is so strong that we talk about God as some all-powerful, super-being. God made us in God's image, and we are forever returning the compliment.

In fact, God is quite different. The God we see in Jesus is radically humble, self-effacing, often hiding. The God we know in Jesus turns upside down our obsession with status. God refuses to play our power games. Our value in God's eyes has nothing to do with our strength and what we achieve.

Jesus' example is clear - he did not resist when arrested, indeed he told his disciples to put away the sword; he wasn't defensive in response to Pilate's questions. Yet despite Jesus' clear example, even the New Testament itself reflects our desire for victory and our need to be right. Within decades of Jesus' humiliating death and humble resurrection, his followers were using the language of victory and power to explain the significance of Jesus. Yes, some parts of the New Testament are sublime – describing God's self-emptying, explaining how God chooses what is weak in the eyes of the world. But not many pages away we have the appallingly violent and imperialistic images in Revelation. There are self-righteous arguments in the Letter to the Hebrews. We even have talk of Jesus returning victorious and all-powerful in the Gospels themselves.

If we were coming up with the story of the resurrection, it would read very differently. We wouldn't have the resurrection taking place in a quiet garden with only a few people knowing what happened. We would have a Marvel Cinematic Universe style resurrection. Some huge display of power,

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Maher in The Times 26 April 2019

a great beam of light shooting heavenward. All the residents of Jerusalem gazing up at Jesus hovering in the sky like some dazzling superhero. Roman soldiers reaching for their weapons. Caiaphas and Pilate trembling. You get the idea.

During Lent, some of us read Jane Williams' excellent book *The Merciful Humility of God*. She puts it like this. "The risen Jesus does not come to his enemies and force them to admit they were wrong and kneel before his transcendent aliveness, his risen body is not gleaming and burnished with the light that cannot be hidden."<sup>2</sup> "[R]esurrection power is ... humble power, not overwhelming its witnesses into submission, but inviting them to believe."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus appears on the edges of things: in a quiet garden, in a locked upper room, on a road to Emmaus, by a lake. On the edges, not in the middle of Jerusalem or in the Temple. These appearances fit God's way of working in secret, humbly, giving away power not grabbing power. Jesus appears to individuals who knew him: Mary, Thomas, and Peter, as we've heard in this morning's Gospel.<sup>4</sup> It's an ordinary, familiar scene by the lake with food. No special effects. Three expressions of love to transform the three denials. No grandstanding from Jesus. Simply mercy and an invitation to love.

There was dazzling light when Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.<sup>5</sup> But notice that only he saw it. The account in Acts says the men with him heard the voice. It doesn't say they were blinded by the light. It wasn't a great show of power for all to see.

So what does the resurrection look like today? Some of you will have heard of Jean Vanier and his L'Arche communities. Years ago Jean Vanier started living with two disabled men in one house. Now there are houses all over the world, small communities of men and women, some with disabilities, some without, sharing life together. Jane Williams says this: "For Vanier, the heart of [L'Arche] movement seems to be a profound meditation on what it is to be human. It is not just the people with disabilities who discover the dignity of being treated as human, it is also the so-called able who discover that there is an intrinsic worth to humanity that is nothing to do with achievement. [Vanier] writes: 'it is this life together that has helped me become more human. Those I have lived with helped me recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability'".<sup>6</sup>

Jean Vanier is now well-known as a wise teacher and commentator. He highlights certain characteristics in our society. "As a society, we have valued only certain gifts and abilities, the obvious ones of success that lead to power and the ability to control our lives and the lives of others."<sup>7</sup> "A society that values only greater and greater power, control and 'success' ... will unwittingly discard the unsuccessful"<sup>8</sup> Our need to succeed is driven by fear of failure. And yet we are fragile, and life is not controllable, and failure is inevitable. Jean Vanier's L'Arche communities reveal how the essential, weakness of each person can be faced without fear.

When we look for the resurrection today, we should look for this pattern of humility, on the edges, in secret. The devoted spouse caring for their terminally ill partner at home. The faithful partner visiting their beloved lost to dementia in a care home. The foster parent looking after children from a broken family. The community nurse visiting house after house each day easing pain and ministering kindness. They are some examples from our Cathedral community. Thanks be to God there are many others, in many places around the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Williams in *The Merciful Humility of God* p.114

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.119

<sup>4</sup> John 21

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.131

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 132

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p.132

The Cross and the resurrection “[confront] us with the reality of how God acts, as opposed to the fantasy of how we would act if we were God.”<sup>9</sup> We are invited to “leave behind our own interpretations of power and salvation, of achievement and merit, and step into the space made for us by the humility of God”.<sup>10</sup> Humility “so strong that death cannot overcome it.” Alleluia.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p.101

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.130