

## Awakened to the Secret Wisdom of the Cross

I Corinthians 2:1-10    Matthew 5:13-20    05.02.17

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The states of being asleep and being awake are used in the New Testament as metaphors for one's spiritual awareness of God.<sup>1</sup> The person who is completely unaware of God is said to be asleep; while the person who is aware of and responsive to God is said to be awake.

We heard in our first reading from the Gospel According to Matthew a section of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. And those of you who were here last Sunday heard the section that immediately precedes it. That preceding section is known as 'The Beatitudes'. In it Jesus pronounces some of the most unlikely people as 'blessed'. "Blessed are the poor...blessed are the sorrowful...blessed are the meek...blessed are the insulted and persecuted..." (Matt. 5:3-5, 11) To each of these poor unfortunates Jesus makes the audacious claim that they are blessed or happy (*makarioi*) because, despite appearances, they will receive a reward from God that will more than compensate for their present state. They are called blessed or happy by Jesus not because they are in a desirable state but because they have been *awakened* to something that the boastful, the successful, the powerful, and the lauded have not realised because the latter are *sleepwalking* through life.

Jesus says to the poor, the sorrowful, the meek, the insulted and the persecuted, along with other unlikely candidates:

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth also uses sleep and awakening as metaphors to indicate the distinction between those who are yet to respond, and those who have responded, to the call to discipleship in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 §71

You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.  
(Matt. 5:13,14)

Now, let's assume that among those who were listening to Jesus's sermon on the mount, as well as those regarded as pitiful, there were some others who were 'doing very nicely'; perhaps people with power and influence and money. They would hardly have been able to believe what they were hearing. Surely Jesus was joking! He could not really mean that these pitiable people were blessed and happy, salt of the earth and light of the world, could he? Yet it seems that Jesus *did* mean what he said. These most unlikely people, and *not* the conventionally successful people, were blessed and happy, were salt of the earth and light of the world, *because* they, and perhaps only they, had been awakened to the secret wisdom of the cross. They, and perhaps only they, had been awakened in each case by a form of crucifixion to the world: poverty of spirit; sorrow occasioned by loss; meekness and gentleness in the face of domineering strength; and persecution by the powerful. Jesus suggests that these people, through their hardship and struggle and loss, are much closer to realising the secret key of the kingdom of God. Having lost most of the material supports in life they are forced to rely on God, and this is why they, and perhaps only they, are awake to God when others are asleep. These are the very people whom Jesus calls to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The Apostle Paul reflects an awakened perspective when he writes to the church at Corinth about the key to God's secret wisdom:

'I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know

nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified...[this is] God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory  
(1 Cor. 2:1-2, 6-7)

The Apostle Paul, when writing to the church in Corinth, writes from perspective of one who has been awakened from his sleepwalking. Paul, when he was formerly called Saul, was a confident, successful, powerful Pharisee who used his considerable ability and zeal to persecute the first Christians. He was en route to Damascus when he experienced his own crucifixion to the world. A light flashed in the sky, he fell to the ground, and heard a voice say 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' This was the voice of Jesus. Saul was struck blind, perhaps as an objective example of his sleepwalking state. Yet sometime afterwards Ananias prayed for Saul and something like scales fell from his eyes: he was awakened to a new reality, he was baptised and given a new name: Paul.

(see Acts 9:1-19)

Paul was awakened to the startling revelation that in the course of persecuting the followers of Jesus he had also been persecuting Jesus himself. Yet this same risen Jesus showed Paul amazing grace, awakened him, and commissioned him to preach the gospel. Despite his attempt to stamp out the early church, Paul was awakened and saved by grace.

Thereafter Paul was intensely aware that despite being a sinner—the chief of sinners, as he once described himself—he had been saved by God's gracious action in Jesus Christ. He had been awakened to the secret wisdom that comes only by being crucified to the world; spiritually crucified with Christ and thereby awakened to being a saint despite his sin.

Paul was also awakened to something else: God *wanted* him. God wanted Paul to be his apostle to the Gentiles to preach the good news that Jesus Christ saves. And the secret wisdom contained in the good news is this: God *wants* each of us so much that he, as a demonstration of grace, allows Jesus Christ voluntarily to die on the cross our behalf because he loves us.

Grace, for the Christian, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, God wants you and me with all our failures and hang-ups; God wants us. In fact, God has already claimed us as his own in the representative humanity of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was baptised by John in the River Jordan, a voice from heaven was heard to say: 'This is my son, my beloved, in whom I delight!' In Jesus the covenant relationship that God has established with Israel finds its culmination and fulfilment. Jesus is the representative Son of Israel and Son of Man. We are awakened to the covenant relationship with God for which we were made and thus to our true humanity when we begin to trust in Jesus. This is the 'secret wisdom that God decreed before the ages for our glory' (1 Cor. 2:7): God the Father loves us as much as he loves Jesus his Son.<sup>3</sup> This is the reality to which we are awakened in Jesus.

But what about those who have not yet been awakened; who are still sleepwalking through life? Well, Paul also writes about them:

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'The Body's Grace', <http://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>. Also p. 44, *Christianity*, Stephen Hunt (Ed.), Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2010

<sup>3</sup> See Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 44

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor. 2:8).

I think it is frequently the case that those with most to lose from the present skewed state of affairs are the most reluctant to be awakened from their collective slumbers. Those with vested interests—and all of us have some vested interests—will naturally protect those vested interests. Where individuals or nations perceive that power and wealth and security are threatened, force and sanctions and walls will be enforced and built to protect that power and wealth and security. This is why both the religious authorities and the secular powers colluded to crucify Jesus. And this is why today the powerless, the poor, and the immigrant are crucified anew. Yet those who have been awakened to God’s secret wisdom disclosed by the crucified and risen Jesus have discovered a secret power. They have discovered that ‘nothing is impossible for God’ (Luke 1:37). And because nothing is impossible for God, ordinary people are emboldened to do things that act as a wake up call.

Like Rosa Parks, who while riding on a bus through Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 decided that she would not give up her seat to a white person. That small act of resistance galvanised the civil rights movement. It awakened people to the everyday injustices being perpetrated due to laws and customs that were the legacy of slavery.

Much more recently, a beggar at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, Jean-Marie Roughal, asked a former government minister, Jean-Louis Debré, if he could look after his bicycle. Debré began chatting to Roughal and encouraged him to write down his experiences. Roughal did so by jotting down his

recollections in notebooks, which he gave to Debré to edit. Debré explained:

I wanted to understand his life, why he begged... Why are only ... celebrities ... politicians, stars of television, radio, cinema, allowed to reveal their past, write or have their autobiographies edited? Do not those who are anonymous have something interesting to say?<sup>4</sup>

Debré edited Roughal’s story and *Je Tape la Manche* (I’m Begging) was published in 2015 and has so far sold 50 000 copies. Roughal is now able to afford his own flat, is looking for a job, and is writing a sequel. What made all the difference was that Debré regarded Jean-Marie Roughal as *significant* and wanted, and this awakened him to his own potential.

The church is a gathering of people who are awakened anew each day to the secret wisdom of the cross, through which God says to each of us: ‘You are significant, you are wanted, and you are loved.’ This, in turn, challenges each of us to regard and treat other people as significant, wanted, and loved.

God loves and wants us for a purpose: through Jesus he calls and commissions us: ‘Don’t just go along with the crowd; I want you to be different. Be salt of the earth’. ‘Don’t be afraid and apologetic because you are my follower; I want you to stand out. Be light of the world.’ ‘You have been awakened; help me to awaken others.’

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘From the streets to the bestseller list’, Kim Willsher, *Observer*, reproduced in *The Guardian Weekly*, 03.02.17