

“Through the eyes of John”

Philosophy begins not in wonder, as the ancients supposed, a contemporary English philosopher, Simon Critchley, claims, but in disappointment.¹ The particular forms of disappointment for him belong to religion and politics and result in the culture of nihilism which confronts us everywhere. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning; it declares and asserts the meaninglessness of all life.²

Philosophy begins not in wonder but in disappointment, he says. Critchley has in mind Plato and Aristotle both of whom, to be sure, spoke of philosophy as beginning in wonder. But is this a complete and adequate account?

Consider the oldest literary work known to humanity, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh, the eponymous hero, goes on a quest for wisdom because of his despair and disappointment at the death of his friend, Enkidu. For Achilles in the *Iliad* of Homer, it is the death of his friend Patroclus that moves him to reflection and action. In the Jewish Scriptures, “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*” a fear that is at once the awe and the terror of the radical otherness of God. Consider, too, the figure of Job. Stripped of everything and sitting in utter misery, he is awakened to the grandeur of the justice of God in creation as the principle upon which the Law depends. He is awakened to wonder. “*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?*” God says to Job, echoing his own question to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, “*Where are you?*” The question highlights the Fall, our awakening to self-consciousness through separation from God, from nature, and from one another. Plato, too, was moved to philosophy out of a profound disappointment with politics. Disappointment and wonder are inextricably connected, it seems.

The doctrine of the Resurrection arises out of the dialectic between disappointment and wonder. In the classical, catholic and ecumenical Eucharistic lectionary, we learn to think the Resurrection largely *through the eyes of John*. There is a marvellous juxtaposition, especially in John’s account, of the garden and the city, of the rural and

¹ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, (London, Verso, New Left Books, 2007), p.1.

² Critchley notes two forms of nihilism, passive and active. Passive nihilism is really about a kind of gated community of the mind, closed off to what it can’t face. Active nihilism “*tries to destroy this world and bring another into being,*” *passim*, p. 5. In my view this doesn’t just mean terrorists and jihadis but includes the dominant authorities within the contemporary Christian Churches engaged in the task of re-imagining God, the Church and the human subject in ways that are utterly destructive of the classical theological traditions upon which the institutions themselves depend. For Anglicans one decisive moment liturgically and theologically was the jettisoning of the classical common prayer tradition as the basis for any Prayer Book revision at the Lambeth Conference of 1958. More crucially was the thoughtless embrace of so-called historical biblical scholarship which successfully undermined the idea of a theology of revelation for all forms of classical Protestantism and for the Roman Catholic Church as well. The latter has been better buttressed against the larger consequences of dismissing the creedal or doctrinal reading of Scripture by the forms of its magisterial authority but suffers from the same intellectual disconnect.

the urban, we might say, something which is of particular significance for the Canadian Church. There is the marvellous dialectical interplay between disappointment and wonder.

Joni Mitchell's song, *Woodstock*, best known, I suppose in Crosby, Still and Nash's rendition which turns it into "*a rousing anthem for the hippie counterculture*" of the sixties,³ (now there's a bit of yesterday for you!), is really a ballad in the country music traditions. Her version of it, recorded after the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival which defined a generation, is really a kind of elegy and a lament for what was longed for but unachieved, even lost. It signals a profound sense of disappointment.

It tells the story of a wanderer meeting a traveler, "*a child of God walking along the road*" who tells his story in answer to the question "*where are you going*"? The question echoes God's question to our humanity and speaks as well to the uncertainties of every age.

"I am going on down to Yasgar's farm/ I am going to join in a rock n' roll band/ I am going to camp out on the land/ and try to get my soul free," free from the constraints of an oppressive society that seems to destroy the environment and our humanity. It signals a kind of longing, a longing for paradise, captured in the refrain.

We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden

The refrain twice repeated undergoes a change the third time at the end of the song.

We are stardust
million-year-old carbon
We are golden
caught in the devil's bargain
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden

Yasgar's farm, as Camille Paglia notes, is "*the hippie reworking of Yahweh's garden,*" paradise.⁴ Yet the Christian message of Easter is not about a return to paradise because that would mean the loss of ourselves, of our self-awareness and our awareness of one another; in short, a loss of meaning and memory. We only know the garden in our separation from it. There can be no going back.

We meet instead in the garden of the Resurrection, the garden of creation renewed. And that is something more and greater. It is about redemption in which the things of the past are not denied but become the vehicles of a greater understanding, the

³ Camille Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn* (Vintage Books, New York, 2005), p. 227.

⁴ Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, p. 229.

understanding of the divine love which makes all things new despite the follies and the madneses of our humanity in all of its disorder and disarray. Human reason need not be constrained to "*the devil's bargain*," the Faustian claim to knowledge as power for that is ultimately a betrayal of reason and of the very principle by which we are said to be made in the image of God. We cannot go back but that needn't mean that we are defined by a technocratic reason for that is a reason which destroys ourselves and nature.

We are more than million-year-old carbon; we are more, too, than the disappointments of our wayward reason. We return not to paradise but to God in the garden of the Resurrection. Through the eyes of John we go from disappointment to wonder.

The significance of seeing through the eyes of John has been largely lost to the Churches. It is, I would like to argue, a fundamental feature of the doctrinal reading of the Scriptures in the classical Eucharistic lectionary which lies at the heart of the Common Prayer tradition. It is only because of the Resurrection, after all, that the Gospels and everything else that comprises the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, come to be written. Principal among the accounts of the Resurrection is *The Gospel of John* which in some sense shapes the doctrinal understanding of the Resurrection for the life of the Church and for the way in which the other Gospels are read. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the Gospel readings appointed for the Sundays of the Easter season right through and including Trinity Sunday.

The sense of the primacy of the Gospel of John for the theological understanding has been supplanted by the so-called historical critical approach which assumes what is called the synoptic problem. At issue are the parallels and similarities in three of the Gospels. On the basis of this question, the reading of the Scriptures in the modern churches of the West follows a three-year pattern: the year of Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The twofold assumption is, first, that Mark is the earliest and therefore the most historical of the Gospels and that, secondly, behind these three Gospels lurks the mysterious and hypothetical text called "Q". Like Q in the James Bond films, Q is quite an inventor, I mean, invention! The irony is that it is utterly unhistorical; the tragedy is that it can't account for the Scriptures which it assumes.

The twentieth chapter of *The Gospel according to St. John* takes us from the garden tomb of Jesus to the Upper Room in Jerusalem; we go from the garden to the city. In both there is equally this transition from disappointment to wonder. Such is the beginning of wisdom for Christians.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb weeping, a figure of disappointment and grief. She leaves in joy and delight, the wonder of the Resurrection in the encounter with the Risen Christ awakening her to a new and profounder understanding of the spiritual reality of Christ. She is set into motion, *Apostle Apostolorum*, an Apostle to the Apostles, as the Fathers say. And, then, in the same chapter of John's Gospel, "*on the same day at evening*" and then "*eight days later*" in the upper room, again "*behind closed doors*," there

is the transformation from disappointment to wonder in the disciples and, especially, in Thomas, so-called doubting Thomas. The hopes and expectations of the disciples had been completely shattered by the events of the Crucifixion. They are huddled behind closed doors in fear and profound disappointment. Then, and, only then, are they awakened to wonder and to a way of seeing the past in a new light.

And so on it goes. *The Second Sunday after Easter* presents us with the image from John's Gospel of Christ the Good Shepherd; an image which is seen precisely in the light of the Resurrection. The Good Shepherd is ultimately about the God who cares, indeed, "*the Good Shepherd giveth his life for his sheep.*" We cannot think this image without connecting it to the sacrifice of Christ. As the Collect makes abundantly clear, God "*has given his only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life.*"

The image of Christ the Good Shepherd belongs to the seven so-called "*I am*" sayings of Jesus. Those saying from John's Gospel provide a way of understanding *God in himself* and *God for us*; they are themselves a series of images about our incorporation into the life of God, about God for us, but they are predicated upon the great revelation of God to Moses, echoed in these sayings, as "*I am who I am,*" God in himself which in the Christian understanding is the Blessed Trinity, the self-related and self-diffusive life of God himself.

The Gospels for the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays after Easter are taken from the sixteenth chapter of John's Gospel, part of the so-called farewell discourse of Jesus that helps in the understanding of the resurrection as radical new life and in the interplay of sorrow and joy and in the overcoming of the world. And everywhere in these Gospel readings there is the recurring mantra of Christ, "*because I go to the Father.*"

Through the eyes of John we are opened out to the wonder of the Resurrection that in turn leads us into the community of the Trinity, the community of divine love. In short, through the eyes of John we discover the theology of Revelation – a way of thinking the Scriptures doctrinally. That theology of Revelation ultimately gathers us into the understanding of God as Trinity.

I would suggest that in the contemporary forms of nihilism in our church and culture we have lost both a sense of the theology of Revelation and a sense of the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet, these are the very teachings that counter the nihilism in our souls and our churches.

Consider the first article of religion. It is entitled, "*Of Faith in the Holy Trinity.*" It begins with the statement that "*there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible*" (Cdn, BCP, p. 699) This is actually the common theological understanding of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion and of much of the philosophy of pagan antiquity as well. It captures succinctly and clearly an understanding of God which lies at the heart of all and any ecumenical discourse; it is the counter to the forms

of intellectual nihilism and atheism which deny outright the concepts of infinity, omnipotence, omniscience; indeed, all of the divine attributes of classical theology. In my view, that is a dogmatic denial, a kind of refusal of the mind. But the article goes on to locate a specifically Christian understanding of God as Trinity. *“And in the unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”* The terms belong to a rich and profound tradition of philosophical reflection which it would be foolish to ignore.

It belongs to the witness of the Christian church to proclaim this teaching. It is there for us to recover or discover. It is there for us to live. It means reclaiming a confidence in the Christian Faith as thinkable and livable precisely in the ruins of the revolution, in the aftermath of the liturgical wars, in the disappointments that belong to the uncertainties of our world and day. Such is the wonder.

Simon Critchley seeks an ethic of commitment in the face of the nihilisms of our world and day, an ethic of commitment at once infinitely demanding and utterly unattainable, and one which is completely devoid of any transcendent principle, God. And yet, even he notes that though *“philosophy in the experience of religious disappointment is godless, ... it is an uneasy godlessness with a religious memory and within a religious archive.”*⁵ It is a remarkable statement. Somehow the ideas and discourse of religion are unavoidable and omnipresent in all the forms of contemporary life and action. We are awakened to philosophy through disappointment and wonder.

The witness of the Prayer Book Society of Canada is perhaps more important at this time in our church and culture than ever before. It is not about clinging to the things of the past; it is about learning to think again the living truth of the Gospel. We can, of course, cling to our disappointments – we are rather good at that – or we can be awakened to the wonder of God, the mystery of the Trinity. It will mean, I think, learning again to see *through the eyes of John*.

Archbishop Cranmer captures wonderfully this essential connection between the theology of Revelation and the Doctrine of the Trinity.

*He that keepeth the words of Christ is promised the love and favour of God;
and that he shall be the dwelling place or temple of the Blessed Trinity.*

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Address to the AGM of the PBSC
Charlottetown, PEI,
May 3rd, 2014*

⁵ Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 2