

Meditation for Lent 6

In her second reflection, our Diocesan Retreats Facilitator suggests that we find ourselves in a liminal time right now. Maggie wrote: 'The liminal space is a time of leaving behind what was, and being prepared for what is to be.'

The concept of liminality is inspiring, unsettling and energizing. In entering liminal space, you leave behind your former ideals and conventions, the status quo, the ordinary routines, inherited mind-sets. You also leave behind your safety zone, you quit your place of security. You step out into a space where you will see things differently, where your world-view might be shattered, where your existing priorities might be turned upside down. You cross a border and go beyond your usual limits. What had been a barrier now becomes a threshold, a stepping stone into a larger spiritual adventure. The liminal spaces into which Jesus leads us in our life are places of radical unmaking and unlearning – uncomfortable spaces where we're called to be utterly vulnerable to God, and from which we will re-enter the world quite changed, even converted! The *limen* is the threshold, the place of departure, a springboard into a fresh way of doing things ...

The concept of liminality derives from Arnold van Gennep's 1909 study *Rites de Passage*, an anthropological study of ritual in communities.¹ He identified three stages in a process of transition: *separation*, involving a metaphorical death or breaking with past practices and expectations; *liminal state* where those to be initiated, for example young people into adulthood, must face challenges to their sense of identity and a process of re-formation; *aggregation* or reintegration into the community as a changed person with a sharpened sense of values.

Victor Turner took this further in his studies among tribes in Zambia.² He noticed that the transitional phase was a testing process of undoing and remaking. The place of liminality thus becomes a place of ambiguity and confusion as one world is left behind, one thought-world, and things are shaken up before one can reenter society with a different perspective, indeed a different social status. This is the place of 'anti-structure': the opposite to the world of normality and of usual structures and roles, the place of status quo, 'business as usual.' But while it is a place of uncertainty, it is precisely here that the person clarifies his or her sense of identity and purpose. Things are discovered in the liminal zone that can't be found in the routines of normal life.

All this resonates strongly, I think, with our current experience. We find ourselves in a liminal space, right now. We live in an in-between time, 'betwixt and between'. We find ourselves in a space where we may long with nostalgia for old, familiar

certainties and securities, for the traditional and safe. But we find, instead, that it is *precisely* here, in the risky and dangerous place, that Christ waits to meet us, to reveal himself to us.

As Hauerwas and Willimon have reminded us, we are called to live as aliens, exiles and pilgrims – that is to say, as liminal people – in this present world.³ We find ourselves in a liminal zone that is bewildering and disorientating. Old familiar landmarks are passing and we are out of our comfort zone. But the liminal place is also the place of discovery, creativity, potentiality. The place of risk is a place of paradox: it is discomfiting but strangely renewing. In the experience of dislocation we find ourselves. Deconstruction leads to reconstruction. In the time of exile and spiritual homelessness we rediscover the heart's true home. Indeed the experience of prayer itself can be a liminal state, demanding of us that we let go of beliefs or ways of doing things that have got us into a rut, and beckoning us to fresh discoveries of God.

So what *are* we learning?

One theme is clear: the cross and resurrection are for today, a lived experience, not ancient history!

In the Gospels, Jesus walks the way of the Cross not as one solitary individual from Nazareth, but as the new Adam, as everyman/everywoman, a corporate universal figure who gathers into himself the pain of the ages. As Suffering Servant he gathered unto himself the hopes and griefs of all people: 'Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases (Isaiah 53: 4). As Son of Man, he bears the pain of humanity. And as Matthew 25 invites us to look today for the features of Christ in the faces of those who suffer, to be alert to his presence in those who are hurting.

Even in the New Testament we get the sense that Jesus is suffering still, after his resurrection. To Saul, the Risen Christ says: 'I am Jesus and you are persecuting me' (Acts 9:4). The writer of Colossians speaks of his sufferings: 'in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, his church' (Col.1:12). The Letter to the Hebrews suggests that it is possible to crucify Christ afresh (Heb.6:6). Pascal wrote: 'Christ is in agony until the end of time.' In our very midst he suffers and rises today.

We are discovering that the Cross and Resurrection are not just historic events from long ago but rather present realities that we live today. This very day we find ourselves walking with Jesus the Way of the Cross.

But we know this really, for it is all in Baptism. We are called to share, to participate, in the Paschal Mystery– not just recall it as a historical remembrance but rather plunge ourselves into its renewing waters. In Baptism we are plunged into and saturated by the Paschal Mystery. We actually die with Christ in a sense and rise with him – not only on the day of our Baptism but every day of our life.

I like the immediacy of the Jerusalem Bible translation of Paul’s words: ‘With Christ I hang upon the cross’ ... ‘we went into the tomb with him’ :

With Christ I hang upon the cross, and yet I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me. My real life is the faith I have in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:19b–20)

When we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life. (Romans 6: 4)

Christian life is a daily dying to sin and rising to new life. Christian life is also allowing Christ to suffer and rise in us.

We could interpret the present situation in a variety of ways. But perhaps the most helpful is to look at it through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. Like the window in the Dominus Fleuit church on the Mount of Olives, opposite the holy city with its faiths and failures. The site recalls where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. The window invites us to look at the present city, with all its heartaches and hopes, through the lens of the Cross and the Eucharist – looking at it in this way allows us to see things differently...to realize that Jesus suffers today and rises today in the midst of the human city. The Paschal Mystery becomes a magnifying glass, helping us to see our present situation with greater clarity and discernment.



He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34–35)

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10: 32–34)

At this present time we find ourselves on such a journey. We are treading a difficult and hazardous path right now. It might even feel like a Via Dolorosa, a way of sorrows, the Way of the Cross. It is a liminal time and place: there is much we can learn on such a path that we can't learn so easily on a normal road. We are learning much more about compassion and self-sacrifice, about true community. We might discover afresh the power of prayer. We can deepen our faith and trust in God, who walks with us.

And we hold onto the hope that this road leads to new life, a fresh beginning, an experience of Easter, of resurrection, a new world.

Questions to ponder

If you reframe the present time as a journey forwards with Jesus, how does this make you feel? Do you feel differently about our crisis – if you see it as a paschal journey, through Good Friday to Easter, the way of the Cross becoming the way of resurrection?

What are you learning on this difficult road

- about God?
- about yourself?
- about the Gospel?
- about the nature of faith?
- about prayer?

Give thanks that nothing is wasted. The present time could turn out to be a time of deep learning and even renewed faith. We may never be the same again! And that is the message of Passiontide and Easter!

Fr Andrew Mayes Priest of Limassol, Spirituality Adviser to the Diocese of Cyprus & the Gulf

¹ A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Routledge, London, 2010)

² V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (Aldine Transaction, Piscataway, New Jersey, 1995). He explores pilgrimage as a liminal experience in V. Turner & E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: anthropological perspectives* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1995).

³ S. Hauerwas & W.H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1989)