

Easter 2020

A sermon by Tom Frame (12/04/20)

There is something about the morning that makes me an early riser. It is not just that the sunlight rouses me from slumber or that I can't sleep because I am anxious about what I didn't do yesterday or why I can't get everything done today, the period after dawn has its own character and mood. The morning is usually quiet and peaceful, relaxed and tranquil. The sun hasn't begun to impose itself and the wind is yet gain momentum. The birds have started to sing and the plants are bursting into life. But it is more than just a physical sensation. It is mental and moral, spiritual even.

I have a certain clarity of thought in the morning that eluded me during the night when the darkness seemed to frustrate clear thinking about needless worries. I often write in the morning - it is usually my best prose. The words come fast, unfettered and almost free. The ideas just seem to flow and there are few hurdles or stumbling blocks that can't be overcome because my mind isn't cluttered.

And in the morning, the pace of life is different because the whole day lies ahead, rich with possibility and opportunity. At 7pm, everything is rushed because the shadows are lengthening and the light is fading. But the options at 7am are unlimited and anything and everything can happen. But this sermon is not an advertisement for early rising although I can't help but note that Jesus was an early riser and a morning preacher. He went to the Temple early to begin the day with God ... and he seems to have preached early in the day ... before the troubles of the day distracted the attention of his hearers. No, this sermon takes its cue from the fact that Jesus Christ was raised early on the third day after his death and its timing - *in the morning* - is often overlooked ... although it is intended to be highly significant especially to St John.

In the fourth Gospel from which I read a few moments ago, great symbolic meaning is attached to the night and to the day. In St John's account of Jesus' words and works, enormous significance is attached to midnight and noon. Thoughts and actions that are either hidden or revealed, evil or good, devious or pure - and so on - are associated with the night or with the day. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night - out of the darkness of ignorance - to question Jesus about his ministry. He is in search of insight, clarity of mind, and abiding truth ... so he comes 'at night'. John mentions this otherwise unimportant or irrelevant observation and hopes you will notice the symbolism.

The disciple Judas quietly leaves the upper room as Jesus and the disciples celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem to speak to the temple authorities about

where Jesus is going and when he will be there. If they want to arrest him with fuss and without fear of sparking a riot, he will help them. And when Judas takes his leave from the last supper, John notes in his gospel: “and it was night”. If you haven’t understood the place of the darkness to this point: it becomes apparent now. In the absence of light, despicable actions and shameful deeds are perpetrated in the hope that fewer people will notice them or the identity of the perpetrator is obscured.

Conversely, the woman at the well with a complicated past in John chapter 4 encounters Jesus at noon (when she is less likely to meet other people) and learns a great deal about herself; the light brings self-awareness that exposes pretence and self-delusion. Night and day, darkness and light are rich in meaning in John’s gospel and you cannot avoid them ... or overlook the spiritual interpretation that is on offer.

And so, John notes that very early in the morning of the third day after Jesus is executed and then buried, something unexpected occurs. Of course, the other gospel writers all note that this unexpected event occurs in the morning – so John is not locating the event at a particular time for symbolic or theological purposes – he is also reporting what happened. But the scene of this unexpected event is used to symbolic effect in three ways – each illustrating an important point.

The first element of symbolism is this: the darkness gives way to light; darkness cannot resist light; it is in the nature of light to drive out the darkness and there is no darkness where there is light. Jesus did not and does not stop being ‘the light of the world’ – as he referred to himself. Death is unable to hold him; the grave cannot triumph against God. Although Jesus’ human body was subjected to the ordeal of death and his remains were placed in a tomb, his spirit (which he had commended to God) was not extinguished and could never be conquered. His resurrection body – which was neither constrained by space nor time – was the source of enlightenment for the disciples. The Risen One was with them and because of that experience, they realised that they were not physical beings having a spiritual experience but spiritual beings having a physical experience.

In the resurrection of Jesus, life had won and death had lost ... and this truth came to the disciples as a searing light that allowed them to see with a clarity that had previously eluded them. They now understand – the purposes of God prevail because the goodness of God persists. However dark our lives might become from time to time, we are given moments of light when we can see clearly ... when the darkness of dispelled and our fears and anxieties are relieved. Jesus is not raised in the middle of the night but early in the morning to remind us of light’s power to multiply where we can see ... and what we can

see. The resurrection is the basis of our interpretation of the world and the source of insight about its meaning.

The second element of symbolism is this: with the dawn new possibilities begin to emerge. If the grave is not the final victor and if death does not conquer all, we can live differently ... we can live in the light of hope – that there is more. There is a disdain for that brand of Christianity that diminishes the importance of this life ... and which sees it merely as a preparation for the next. In other words, this life is a trial run, or a test ... for the real thing that is yet to come ... about which we know very little. According to this view, every trial and tribulation that is endured in this world will be repaid in the next – as though God does keep score or acknowledges some kind of strange debt ... so that frugality and self-denial will be rewarded by plenty and self-indulgence in heaven. It is a strange sort of outlook – you resist having things now because you hope to get those same things in greater quantities in the world to come. Perhaps the logic is this: you will appreciate them more because you have had to wait?

The alternative approach is to contend that this world is all there is ... so eat and drink, accumulate and consume ... because tomorrow you might be dead and all you worked to secure will be enjoyed by someone else. This mindset cannot make any sense of life's injustices (that some die young and some die old) because they are just bad luck – injustice does not actually exist – it is simply how we try to balance differences in fate between birth and death so that good fortune is spread a little more evenly.

The resurrection is a world-changing proclamation that there is more than this life and this world – and what we do here is 'the morning' of the totality of our existence. Death is not the end; it is the beginning – a new phase of our journey ... a new mode of being and one that is freed from the trials and tribulations of this world and this life. Why? Because resurrection gives physical death a different character. We might be concerned about dying and troubled about death. That is OK because our vision of what lies beyond this world is partial and imperfect. But we are not to let the prospect of death become a source of paralysis ... we are to live life today as though we will live forever ... and believe me ... you will live differently in the light – the morning light – of that outlook.

The third element of symbolism is this: the day lies open and there is endless opportunity. Many people live within their comfort zone, they crave security and they are risk averse. Better not to succeed ... than to succumb to failure. These are the people whose lives are safe and predictable, calculated and programmed, where nothing is ventured and nothing is gained ... where we criticise those who try to make something of themselves while we occasionally

realise we are a shadow of who we might have been. If the death of Jesus – and unmitigated tragedy for humanity and for God – could not just be reversed but be redeemed, if something that might have been a curse for humankind could be transformed into a blessing, then we have ample encouragement to step out in faith, with courageous gestures and bold plans, knowing that whatever the outcome, God can resurrected our plans from failure and turn them into achievement – if only that we gain a better sense of our limitations. The key text is Romans chapter 8 verse 28: “all things work for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purposes”.

If there are parts of our life that are sensitive or tender, wounded or injured, we may be disinclined to examine them for fear of what is there ... because we don’t want to be confronted with who we have become or what we have done ... there may be people we avoid because they challenge us or there may be challenges we avoid because they reveal our weakness or expose our fear ... there are many difficult journeys from which we shy away in life because we feel vulnerable or because we are proud ... these are often the journeys we need to undertake – especially if God is calling us to be pilgrims into ourselves and our experiences – and we can take these journeys ... if we believe that God can bring good from whatever we are prepared to face in life. Jesus was prepared to accept his fate, to take the sin of the world upon himself, because he believed that God would neither abandon him (despite his fears) nor forsake him.

He believed in God’s commitment to good – and that goodness abides – and the resurrection is evidence – strong evidence – that his faith in God was not misplaced – and neither is ours when we are ready and willing to walk in Christ’s footsteps and face what is wrong with the world and with ourselves. When you can see, the places you can go are endless. In the light of the resurrection, the morning can revive our courage and restore our hope.

Jesus was not resurrected at noon, in the afternoon, at dusk, in the evening or at midnight. As we reflect on the first Easter, let us not overlook the significance or the symbolism of its timing – in the morning – and realise the new day has dawned for humanity and for each of us. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia.