

# The Passion in dialogue with modern society

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The *Memoria Passionis*, the mission to speak of the Passion of Jesus and keep alive its memory as the source of our salvation, is a constant in the life of the Church. Christ's life-giving death and resurrection is the heart of the Good News - in brief, it is the Good News, the Gospel. What is original and astounding about it is the revelation of salvation - of divine glory - as coming about through and by means of its exact opposite - humiliation, condemnation, death. Salvation or Resurrection is not different from, or a move beyond the Passion, but rather it is the other side of the one coin. To keep alive the Memory of the Passion is to speak very precisely of this reality and truth; and it is this precise mission which the Church needs, and has always needed.

St Paul, in apostolic times, was the great missionary exponent of this Memory. At the heart of his own conversion was the astonished realisation that the God of Israel has shown himself present and acting in this most unexpected way - by any usual standards a simply absurd way. 'And so', says Paul, 'here are we preaching a Crucified Christ ...' His great texts, especially 1 Corinthians and Philippians, are the foundational biblical references to which we turn time and again as the basis for our own historical mission and charism as Passionists.

Others have already spoken about this particular Passionist mission - its historical origins, its charismatic provenance, its implications. Our little story - this 'poor and least Congregation', as St Paul of the Cross taught us to speak of ourselves - is a tributary of a greater ecclesial current that courses through the life of the Church across its history: the demand to hold fast to the *full* truth of the Gospel. The Church - all of us - need constant reminding of that which is the true source of our salvation. The mission of the *Memoria Passionis* is a constant in the life of the Church.

This mission - or charism or gift of the Spirit - is re-born in all the different historical circumstances of the Church's existence. It is a prophetic gift whose constant goal is to arouse Christian people - all of us - from our forgetfulness (again to use the language of St Paul of the Cross) and to return to authentic faith. Christianity is a religion of memory - 'do this in memory of me', we recall each day at the Eucharist - but our history, like that of Israel of old, is also one of repeated forgetting. The MP has to be understood as a constant *tensiveness* with this forgetfulness. It is always in contest with - or dialogue with - the times, with modern society.

This talk has three parts;

The first part explores the nature of the dialogue that is set up between the Passion and modern society, its character or quality, and the deep roots of our forgetfulness. Here I will follow closely a work by Rowan Williams, the Anglican theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury - a very challenging approach to the meaning of the Passion.

The second part re-visits the theme of contemporary manifestations of the Passion - 'the Crucified ones' of today alongside 'the Crucified One', in the language of the 1988 General Chapter. But rather

than retracing instances of the ‘Crucified ones’ descriptively I will be looking at some of the social and cultural dynamics here, and I will draw on the perspectives set out by Pope Francis in his two great programmatic documents, *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si’*. In the third part I will briefly raise some practical questions about re-defining our mission and ministries for the world and Church of today, without pretending to offer much by way of an answer.

Finally, I will return to the theme of memory and the characteristic kind of religious knowing that the *Memoria Passionis* embodies.

### **The Passion in dialogue with a forgetful society**

The French sociologist of religion, Danielle Hervieu-Leger, in her book *Religion as a Chain of Memory* offers a diagnosis of our rapidly changing society, a society in the throes of transformation. (Danielle Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.) This re-making of society is happening at all levels, and most importantly at the level of lived culture. What it produces, she says, is an ‘amnesiac society’. New futures come upon us with such rapidity that the present as well as the historical laid-down traditions from the past are thrust behind us with ever greater force. Thus we lose our collective social and cultural memory.

The forgetfulness which the MP combats has roots in this kind of social dynamic, as well as in our simple human slothfulness. But it is more than that. The Gospel of the Passion is a Word that confounds us, and it is inherently challenging to hold fast to it. Rowan Williams in one of his early works, *The Wound of Knowledge*, begins as follows:

Christian faith has its beginnings in an experience of profound contradictoriness, an experience which so questioned the religious categories of its time that the resulting organization of religious language was a centuries-long task. At one level, indeed, it is a task which each generation has to undertake. And if ‘spirituality’ can be given any coherent meaning, perhaps it has to be understood in terms of this task: each believer making his or her own that engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith which is so evident in the classical documents of Christian belief. (p. 1) (Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979)

Williams is, of course, referring to the Cross as the contradiction at the origins of Christianity, and the way that the Cross of Christ as God’s means of salvation upsets all ‘reasonable’ standards of religiosity. This includes the standards that Christians throughout the ages will revert to, consciously or sub-consciously. We are always, in the first instance, confounded by the Cross. Here, I suggest, lie the deeper roots of our forgetfulness.

If it’s true that, at some deep level of our ingrained ways of thinking, it makes no sense to think of God working in weakness rather than in power – in *my* weakness rather than my power, my virtue – then we are inevitably going to seek some other way of reconciling the reality that our religious tradition presents to us of a Crucified Christ with what we (think we) ‘know’. Favourite among these religious stratagems (these forms of religious forgetfulness) is to embrace Resurrection as the ‘true’ means and

meaning of salvation to which the Crucifixion was merely the passing prelude. Williams will have none of this. He points out that:

In one way or another, practically all the writers (of the New Testament) are attempting to come to terms with the devastating finality of the life and death of Jesus. (p. 4)

Now, we might want to question this starting point. Surely it's been a basic principle of NT interpretation over the last century that these texts were written 'in the light of Resurrection faith'? They are theological texts articulating the faith that the post-Resurrection community lived by, a faith and witness whose dominant note was 'He is Risen!' Williams, of course, would agree: 'The believer now lives in and from the life of Jesus crucified and risen.' (p. 5). But note how he relates these two events:

The dead Jesus has been vindicated by his Father: the resurrection is that which points to the crucified as God's decisive manifestation. He is 'designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (Rom. 1.4) (p. 5))

This stands in opposition to much of our religious sensibilities and a facile resurrectionism which fits too nicely with a spirit of cultural optimism and a denial of the darker realms of the human spirit – the 'you're worth it' mentality. On the other hand, of course, there is that morose contemplation of the Passion that glories in suffering and death and sees only gloom and destructiveness in the world. Both are a kind of 'false memory' syndrome, a forgetfulness of the true work of God. For them, either the Passion is not needed because, actually, all is well with the world; or the Passion is not effective because, actually, the world remains radically unredeemed. It is in between these two defective spiritual conditions that the Memoria Passionis takes its stance. Our forgetfulness, of course, isn't just manifested in right and wrong theological ideas. Our dialogue – or contest - with the Passion is at the level of practical more than theoretical reason. Rowan Williams makes this case powerfully in his account of St Paul's life and witness and teaching – which confronts head on, as he puts it, 'the inexorable ironies of salvation and condemnation united in a single story'. (p. 5) Williams paints a dramatically sharp picture of Paul. Drawing on the Johannine text 'If I had not come and spoken to them they would not have sin' (John 15.22), Williams comments that for Paul

The rejection of Jesus by men is at the same time the rejection of men by God, and it is acted out among the particular people whose privilege and burden it is to understand the intimacy of election to the full. (p. 6)

What this leads to is

the acknowledgement of God as a God who is present in and works in human failure and helplessness – so much so that it can be said that he 'forces' people into a decision to acknowledge or not to acknowledge their failure, in the events of Jesus' life and death. (p. 6)

Only when we fully and deeply acknowledge failure, sin, weakness and betrayal are we aligned to the mystery of salvation. But who wants to acknowledge this? Who looks for salvation at the point of and in the unlikely place of their sinfulness? Does the Church find its dreadful failure in the matter of sexual abuse a place of God's redeeming work? Could you even say that publicly, preach that? Are we able to think of the diminishment we have lived through in religious life as a place of salvation?

The unremitting pessimism in many communities suggests not.

We do, of course, think of such things as ‘a cross to bear’; but I suggest that’s not quite the same as embracing God’s salvific power at the heart of our failures. Bearing our cross is heroism; embracing failure and sinfulness is accepting condemnation – out of which comes salvation. It is little wonder, then that we forget – and want to forget – the Passion, or we remember it only in a sanitised version. Williams exposes us, somewhat brutally:

To believe in Jesus’ God, the God of unconditional accessibility and even-handed compassion, to believe in an anarchic mercy that ignores order, rank and merit, is to accept that our projects and patterns are the mark of failure, of illusion, of the infantile belief that we can dictate truth and reality. Because it is menacing and painful to be confronted with the knowledge that our constructions of controlled sense are liable to be empty and self-serving, we readily turn to violence against the bearers of such knowledge: in Johannine terms, we have decided we want to stay blind when the light is there before us, claiming we can see perfectly well (John 8:41). And the New Testament (especially the Fourth Gospel) suggests that only when such a naked collision of interest occurs can the uncompromising reality of God over against our patterns of ‘religious control’ become clear. God provokes crisis to deceive our self-deceiving reliance on ‘Law’, our dependence on what we as individuals can make and sustain, or what we as societies can administer for our own unchallenged interest. Self-dependence is revealed as a mechanism of self-destruction; to cling to it in the face of God’s invitation to trust is thinly veiled self-hatred. (p. 7)

It’s the voice of a prophet! This was the young Rowan Williams, probably not yet 30. Would he say the same today, or say it that way? Let’s leave theology there for now. I will come back to it at the end. We move on to the dialogue between this mystery of the Passion and modern society with Pope Francis as our guide.

### **The challenge of *Laudato Si’* and *Evangelii Gaudium***

In *Laudato Si’* the Pope addresses one of the fundamental questions of our time, ecology; and in *Evangelii Gaudium* he surveys the pastoral reality of the Church within the context of modern society, and calls for a renewed sense of mission marked above all by joy. In both documents we find abundant reference to those we would call ‘the Crucified ones’. Chapter one of *Laudato Si’* lays out the damage we do to ‘our common home’, and makes a plea to ‘hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ (n. 49), linking ecological issues directly to poverty, since it is the less developed countries that suffer most from environmental degradation. In *Evangelii Gaudium* the Pope calls for ‘a poor Church for the poor’. He is forthright about the denial of justice to the great majority in the Two Thirds World; and he irritated many powerful people with his criticisms of how the capitalist system is allowed to operate.

After describing the various manifestations of the ecological crisis, *Laudato Si* speaks of ‘the Gospel of Creation’, outlining how Revelation and the Gospel must be understood and presented. The most significant section of the encyclical, to my mind, is what follows, when the Pope analyses the ‘technocratic paradigm’ at the root of modern conceptions of progress. This paradigm shapes how we all

now tend to relate to the world, as well as how scientific and economic endeavour is structured. In contrast, the Pope stresses human responsibility for stewardship of the earth's goods and rejects an arrogant sense of human 'dominion' which treats the natural world and other creatures simply instrumentally (n. 116).

It's the technocratic paradigm, or way of thinking, that concerns us here. Our culture is in thrall to technological solutions to all problems and all human ills. This is evident, for example, in current discussions about intelligent robots - what tasks they're able to take over from humans, and the morbid fear and fascination that they could surpass us and become our masters. There's a book published recently by a previous enthusiast for technology who now questions the way we've become reliant on it as the all-encompassing solution (*Technology Geek* Kentaro Toyama. See *The Observer*, 30.08.15). But he's swimming against the tide, and he freely admits that his former colleagues listen to him with polite interest but deep scepticism - 'what else but technological solutions do we have', is what they say. So, more i-phones, faster computers, smarter programming, apps for everything - the technological paradise!

But we see through this rather quickly if we stop to ask 'will it bring us joy?' Joy is what the exuberant early passages of *Evangelii Gaudium* propose, and Pope Francis wants us to re-discover the joy that supervenes upon a life of abandonment to the service of others, responding to the invitation to a love relationship with Jesus Christ, moving out of ourselves in glad acceptance of our bonds with each other. This insistence on the joy of Gospel - *Evangelii Gaudium* - is characteristic of the Pope's approach. He emphasises the need for the right perspective in preaching the Gospel - start with the fundamentals, present the basic truths first - the love of God, forgiveness, salvation - then you can talk about moral demands.

At the same time, *EVG* does not pull its punches. The sins of the Church - clericalism above all - and the shortcomings of society - especially the social exclusion of whole populations - are called out. The Pope is taking aim again at the merely technocratic culture and society, but also at the self-satisfaction and self-absorption in so much of the church community.

But we needn't - and shouldn't - become pessimists or technophobes, rejecting all that's helpful and life-enhancing in technology. The problem isn't what technology helps us to do and know; *it's what it causes us to forget*. This correlation of new knowing with forgetfulness (Hervieu-Leger's theme) is a very clear consequence of consumerism, which is another - and perhaps the most basic - socio-cultural structuring mechanism of modern society.

Consumerism has a profound hold over our minds and imaginations. At an obvious level, we know the influence of advertising, on families as well as individuals - parents compelled to meet the competitive pressures their children come under from their peers at school. We succumb to the throw-away culture where things are replaced not repaired. We are all complicit in the exalting of what we want into what we need. That, and much else, is fairly obvious. (On consumerism, see Vincent Miller *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, NY and London: Continuum, 2005)

What we're perhaps less aware of is the way the habits of mind and the attitudes and dispositions of

consumerism begin to infect our values and life practices. Put simply, in a highly consumer-structured society such as our own, values and practices become consumer goods. We are taught, subliminally, to see our religious and cultural practices in a different way – not as religious disciplines which have the power to lead us to conversion, but as life-enhancing opportunities, to be taken up and left aside insofar as they are useful to me, the sovereign consumer. We learn to approach even very basic values the same way. Religious faith becomes a ‘resource’ for community cohesion (or division, depending on your point of view). Marriage, vocation, commitment, and the human person herself can be re-configured in the consumerist frame. Commitment is still expected in close personal relationships – maybe even greater commitment than previously – but it’s the commitment to ‘work on’ the relationship, to make it satisfying, guaranteeing ease of communication and transparency. Should the relationship falter or fail to meet ‘my needs’ commitment dissolves. Under the influence of a consumerist culture, marriage – the Christian ‘practice’ of Matrimony – no longer holds together. It loses the power to call us to the conversion of life and transformation of our hearts that the Gospel requires. These are central dynamics in modern society – not a complete account by any means, but they are at the roots of society’s characteristic failings and shortcomings – especially how the poor and excluded end up. The problem isn’t the new ways and new things they teach us about ourselves and the world; *it’s what they make us forget*. I heard the President of Ireland being interviewed a couple of weeks ago on the current humanitarian social emergency in Europe, with the influx of refugees and asylum seekers. He evoked Ireland’s historical memory of migration in a very powerful call for generosity and compassion. However, there are very powerful forces in view today which would consign such memories to oblivion, and raising the dark spectre of ‘Fortress Europe’ closed to foreigners.

The compulsion – and illusion - of being in control that Williams speaks of is in full view.

### **Modern Society and the Memoria Passionis**

But now we come to the dialogue between this kind of society and the Memoria Passionis. Frans’ wonderful presentation yesterday of the Passion in art shows that there are very different mediums for dialogue – it’s not just words or ideas. And the diversity of artistic representations across the ages, as well as Mark-Robin’s forensic exploration of the complexities of religious language, confirm Rowan Williams’s point in my opening quote that the contradictoriness of the Passion ‘so questioned the religious categories of its time that the resulting organization of religious language was a centuries-long task ... which each generation has to undertake.’

At this point, facing modern modern society, Rowan Williams would, I think, as a first step, have us face the realities of failure and suffering and oppression head on - look into ‘the heart of darkness’ – above all, not seek to escape. He would have us acknowledge our part in the ecological crisis, and our easy fit with consumerism, and our complicities in the abuse crisis in the Church. He would have us live the pain and the suffering – in the strange conviction that these are places where God’s salvific power is at work. It’s the story of the Good Thief:

One of the criminals hanging there abused him. ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well! But the other spoke up and rebuked him. ‘Have you no fear of God at all? You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it; we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come

into your kingdom.’ Jesus replied: ‘Indeed, I promise you today you will be with me in paradise.’ (Luke 23:39-43)

That’s the promise of final salvation, of eschatological hope. But the *Memoria Passionis* is a word for the present time as well as for the future. Perhaps only witnesses can open up this path for us. What was the source of Nelson Mandela’s extraordinary influence across the world as well as in South Africa? (‘The President of the human race’ as the British politician Tony Benn called him.) Surely it was the way he lived his long years of imprisonment on Robben Island, absorbing the injustice of it, and eventually returning to the political process moulded by this experience as a reconciler and capable of embracing former foes? God’s salvific work in the very depths of oppression.

Returning to the ecology theme, if we were to pursue the dialogue between the *Memoria Passionis* and ecology we would be catapulted into a really deep and searing questioning of our lifestyles and use of the world’s resources. It would be very uncomfortable, and the Passion motif itself would make it so. But the heart and horizon of the dialogue would not be some behavioural or even attitudinal change – necessary as those are; it would be the conviction that even here, where we are doing criminal damage to the earth, the salvific power of God is at work, because it is his world, with which the Cosmic Christ is identified. *Laudato Si’* has a section in its final chapter on ‘Ecological Conversion’ (nn. 216-221). I have to say I find it overly aspirational and a bit disappointing. The *Memoria Passionis* would give it greater bite! I’ve the same reaction to the American theologian Elizabeth Johnson’s book on evolution and Christian faith, (*Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, 2014). After a really wonderful exposition of Darwin’s theory, and a fine presentation of the classical Christian theology of creation, it turns into a mere lament about the damage human beings are doing to the earth. That gets nowhere. In guarding against a too human centred theology of Redemption which sidelines the material world *Ask the Beasts* fails to see that while human beings may be the problem they’re also the solution. Again, the *Memoria Passionis* leads here to a deeper sense of both the tragic in terms of the environment and of salvific hope.

This kind of focus and reliance on the *Memoria Passionis* in dialogue with the issues of modern society does not – must not – lead to mere passive acceptance of suffering or injustice. It is rather the energising spiritual revelatory experience that drives a Christian response.

### **Re-defining Passionist mission and ministries**

I said I would say a word about re-defining our mission and ministries in the light of this exploration of the Passion in dialogue with modern society. I suggest that to date we’re much clearer on mission than we are about ministry. We have the benefit of a clear charism, and a clear sense of where we fit theologically in the Church, and a sense of the specific contribution we bring to the mission of the Church. But how to make it happen? Are there specific ministries we need to focus on, as in the past with preaching missions and retreats, and then parishes? The historical account Sr Elisa gave of the Cross and Passion Sisters is illuminating. Along with the sisters, we seem now to be a charism and mission in search of a ministry (or ministries). What should be clear is that living our mission is an integral and central feature of living the mystery of Christ as his Body, the Church; and therefore, our ministries have to be aligned with the ongoing life of the Church.

There’s very unlikely to be a single answer about our ministries. Rather, it’s a matter of discerning

in concrete situations the ministries that will serve our mission and enable us to live out our charism. But, do we have specific criteria to guide such a discernment? My suggestion is that we have to adopt ministries - and approaches within ministries – *that will enable God's people to live and experience their daily lives in the light of Christ's saving Passion* – both under its judgement and in confidence of the immensity of love which the Passion embodies. For, as St Paul of the Cross insisted, the Passion is the greatest work of God's love. Our ministries should be geared to encourage and facilitate spiritual and theological reflection on personal and social living, leading to a deepening of prayer and a life of generous service. In the end it is all love, and the Passion reveals the deep meaning of love.

### **The Memoria Passionis – the Wound of Knowledge**

Keeping the Memory of the Passion is a contemplative wisdom, dwelling on the deepest mystery of Christian faith. It is the mystery of the wounds of Christ which are, paradoxically, our salvation. Rowan Williams's phrase, 'the wound of knowledge', is a way of showing the Passion subverting our ways of thinking, our language, and especially our religious language, so as to disclose God's ways. Christ's saving wounds, paradoxically, inflict a wound on our human ways of knowing.

The *Memoria Passionis* is a wounded and wounding knowledge - not the milk of babes that St Paul felt was all he could feed the recalcitrant Corinthians (I Cor. 3:2). Passionists truly following their calling are bearers of a kind of spiritual stigmata, as they attempt to bring themselves and others to the upsetting but liberating Word of the Cross. Dwelling in the wisdom of the Cross of Christ (I Cor. 1:18) means subverting our easy certainties and the cosy illusions of the conventionally religious, and any merely moralistic religion.

It is in this way that we come upon the unexpected wondrous mercy of God and grow into the measure of Christ.

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Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979

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