

15 May 2022

St George's Epsom
9.00am, 10.30am services

SHATTERED DREAMS AND RESURRECTION HOPES (Romans 15: 23-28, Luke 24:13-16)

Martin Luther King's "*I have a dream*" speech resonates today just as much as it did when first delivered to 250,000 people in 1963. Its call for racial justice has inspired generations of activists to take up the struggle for equity and freedom and the speech regularly appears in lists of all-time best speeches alongside Winston Churchill, JF Kennedy and Emeline Pankhurst.

Far less well known is a sermon he preached six years earlier simply called '*Shattered Dreams*'. He begins by saying:

'Our sermon today brings us face to face with one of the most agonising problems of human experience. Very few, if any of us are able to see all our hopes fulfilled... each of us like Shubert, begins composing a symphony that is never finished.'

King chose as his text an obscure passage in Romans about Paul's long held dream of travelling to Spain to preach the gospel and encourage the fledging local church. In his lifetime Paul covered over 10,000 miles by land and sea preaching the gospel in much of the Middle East, through Greece into Europe, but always he dreamed of reaching Spain – the most western point in the known world, so he could bring the gospel to the four corners of the world. Paul in his letter promises to visit the small community of Christian believers in Rome along the way.

The Spanish dream helped sustain him through years of often arduous travel where he was beaten, shipwrecked, pelted with stones and caught out on the open seas. But Paul never made it to

Spain. He did make it to Rome, not as a free man, but in chains, where he was imprisoned, later freed, before being put to death by the Roman authorities. Never reaching Spain was not the only disappointment Paul was to face. He suffered from a long-term health complaint, quite probably a chronic eye condition. He was imprisoned and shipwrecked. He fell out with friends and companions and according to NT Wright in his magnificent book: *Paul: The Biography*, he also struggled at times with his own mental health.

'Who has not had to face the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams?' asks MLK.

Whilst it is good to encourage our children to dream big dreams, the far more universal human story is of hopes dashes, dreams only partially fulfilled and, in many cases, completely shattered. I am not talking about selfish dreams for fame and fortune, but good dreams – to make a difference in the lives of others, to be able to raise a family, to grow old together, to reconcile with an estranged friend. These are dreams, that like Paul's desire to visit Spain, sustain and inspire us and mean we are willing to make great sacrifices to see them realised.

Well for those of us who something of King's blasted hopes and shattered dreams, imagine what it must have been like for that tight inner circle of men and women who accompanied Jesus throughout his public ministry, to see their friend Jesus dry retching on a Roman Cross, seemingly powerless to save himself. How do you make sense of that? They'd seen the miracles, been captivated by his words and deeply moved by his love. Some of them at least were just starting to believe, that incredibly, impossibly, fabulously, it might just be true - Jesus was the son of God. He was the long waited for Messiah.

But in the end, he was just another charlatan – like all the others who had claimed to be the Messiah. A fraud, well-meaning maybe,

but nothing more. Dead on a Roman cross. They'd all been taken in. Maybe Barabbas bar Jesus was right after all – the only way to know true freedom was through violent uprising.

So how did the disciples ease the pain of a shattered dream. Well two of them at least try to anaesthetise the pain by fleeing the scene and heading to Emmaus –away from Jerusalem, away from the other disciples and away from any reminder of the dream that had sustained them. It's such an understandable human response to want to flee the pain. Some of the other disciples hid, while Judas took his life. Only the women at least initially went to the tomb.

I want to contrast their reactions to a shattered dream with Paul who is now in a narrow celled Roman prison – any hope of visiting Spain dashed. We know how he reacts because he dictates a letter from that prison cell to the church in Philippi:

I know what it is be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any every situation whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength. (Phil 4:11-13)

I have learnt to be content in all situations. Temperamentally, I doubt this contentment came easily for Paul. He had to learn it which suggests to me a very human struggle to come to terms with disappointment.

That gives me such great hope. Like most of us, I am no stranger to broken dreams and to the heartache that follows. I might not have been shipwrecked and imprisoned but in common with many of us I have known what it is like to miss out on life's Spain through no fault of my own. Like many of us I have endured the pain of being misrepresented, motives questioned and the 2am wakeup call where your mind keeps playing over and over again "if only". I know what

it is like to watch a beautiful dream slip out of your hands and realise you are completely powerless to do anything about it.

Unlike Paul I have not yet learned to be content in all of life's disappointments, but I would like to hope I am far less likely to flee to Emmaus than I once was.

So what am I learning and how does resurrection hope sustain me in life's equivalent of Schubert's half-finished symphony? Well it is simply this:

1. **Never has there been a moment in history yet, or to come, when things looked bleaker than the seeming victory of the principalities and powers over the dying Jesus on the Cross.** The cackle of the devil rang out across the Universe. But even the Cross - the world's most visible symbol of a broken dream was woven by God somehow into his redemption plans for the world. That gives me such hope. God promises to weave even my disappointments, my half-finished symphonies, into his great masterplan. Even where I am the cause of my discomfort, God says trust me, I am up for this. You see there is nothing that can separate from the love of God and nothing that God can't somehow, miraculously weave into his plan for us.
2. **God so wants to bless us.** It is his very nature, in that sense he is almost like (with the greatest respect) an irrepressible child who is determined that they are going to have a party, and everyone is invited. He wants his face to shine upon you and give you peace. The thing I am learning is that the pathway to blessing is more often through my wounds and disappointments than it is through my triumphs.
3. **I am learning to let go of the dream at the same time as holding fast to the deeper dream.** Let me explain. Recall the two disciples who fled Jerusalem for Emmaus and how Jesus

joins them, yet they were kept from recognising him, even though he was walking right beside them. Was that some kind of conjurors trick? I think there is a much simpler answer. They did not recognise him because they did not expect to see him. How often has that been our experience? We hold so tightly to our dreams and our expectation of how they will be fulfilled that we fail to see the dream is being realised right before us, but in ways we did not expect. Never did those two disciples imagine that the Saviour of the World's death on a cross was just the start and that it would provide the bridge that will ultimately complete God's still unfinished symphony. In my own case it's taken me a very long time to realise that God is richly realising my dreams in ways which are both delightful and wonderfully bespoke, but I am among the last to realise this. Why? Because I have invested so much into my particular version of that dream. "I keep myself from recognising him." So how does that show up in my life? Well, I am still learning to be content, got a way to go, but increasingly my prayers are simply "Your will be done" whereas once I would have wanted to give God some helpful guidance along the way.

4. **The redemption of a shattered dream always involves a deeply personal encounter with Jesus**, even if you are not always aware of it. I do not think there is any other way. In the case of Paul, it was a dramatic revelation on a Damascan road. In the case of our two disciples a slow revelation that involved companionship, the reading of Scripture, conversation and the breaking of bread.
5. **We choose our posture.** Faced with heartache we often retreat into cynicism or a religious fatalism. We build the protective walls so we will not be so hurt again, but the hope of the resurrection is that we allow our wounds (which remember Jesus retained in his resurrection body) to become our greatest

testimony to the love of God. It is through our wounds and our dashed hopes that we can be set free. Like Paul we learn to be content. We get to choose our posture, whether to be the victim, whether to retreat into a spiritualised fatalism – “It was never meant to be” or an ice-cold cynicism. Even though the wounds are still visible on our body, we can choose, in the strength of the risen Christ, to pick ourselves up again, bloodied and bruised and allow our wounds to become our greatest strength.

Conclusion

In reality, many of our good dreams will not be fulfilled in our lifetime – the gospel did reach Spain but not through Paul. You see our resurrection hope – it precedes and extends well beyond our earthly days, because we are artisans not architects. We labour to build the house of God, brick by brick adding to that which has gone before and allowing for God’s grace to enter in and to do the rest.

Paul never made it to Spain – to the four corners of the world. Instead, he was confined within the four narrow walls of a prison cell. And yet it was out of that shattering disappointment and confinement that Paul dictated his prison letters which shaped our theology, inspired Martin Luther King and others, and continues to sustain us to this day ...and reach to the four corners of the world.

So let me ask you. What is your equivalent of Paul’s Spain – that dream you know lies shattered? What is that half completed symphony that you are realising will not be completed in your lifetime?

Well take it to the Cross – that seeming symbol of defeat. Take that disappointment and heartache and lay it once and for all at the foot of the cross... and leave it there. Allow God’s grace and infinite

desire to want to bless you to somehow take that broken dream and weave it into his grand masterplan to redeem the world. Allow God to take your narrow prison cell and turn it into an act of redemption and love.

And whatever you do – notice and marvel and what happens next.

Chris Clarke
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