

+ A heroic myth or legend usually follows a standard pattern. The hero embarks on a journey to save something or obtain some benefit for his family, his tribe, or his nation. Along the way, he must face down some darkness or evil power, either within himself or externally. The critical moment of struggle between the good hero and the evil whatever or whomever often takes the form of a descent, literally or metaphorically. We are all familiar with sayings like, “that was a low point in my life,” or “he hit rock-bottom.” This figure of speech reflects the same mythological pattern. In stories, the hero, having been brought to the very threshold of death, finds some way to win through, to overcome the dark powers, to ascend, returning in triumph, vindicated as the hero the audience wants to hear about. Trophies, benedictions, public honors—these belong to the victorious hero and his side-kicks. To the wicked, heroic stories are typically ruthless in meting out justice. This is especially true in the older versions of fairy tales. In the Brother's Grimm version of *Cinderella*, for example, the wicked stepsisters get blinded by a flock of doves at the wedding of the once-neglected and abused heroine. That didn't make into the Disney version, but even in more light-hearted stories of heroes and heroines, there is usually at least some moment of justified retaliation against the antagonist or antagonists—some moment when they are humbled, made to look ridiculous, put into their proper place.

The similarities between the gospel of Jesus Christ, in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, and the arch-typical myth of the hero, has of course led many so-called students of religion to dismiss Christianity as another fable, at best a beautiful and morally profound expression of the deepest longings and aspirations of humanity. All too often they fail to account for those striking differences, those reversals of what is expected or appropriate, that occur with frequency in the gospel narrative. These are things that shock, and oftentimes confront and oppose what seem to be more natural and human inclinations and desires.

The return of Christ to his disciples is such an opposition. Appearing to them where they are hiding for fear of the Jews, he does not bring them the benediction that, humanly speaking, they would probably be disposed to expect. To be honest, if this was an action movie, of the sort that people flock to see over and over again, it would have run something like this: “I'm back, fellas. And totally immortal. Pilate, Herod, and the Pharisees are toast. Start the revolution—overthrow the Evil Empire. Usher in a new era of prosperity and peace for all God's children.” And this would not have been out-of-line with what the faithful Jews of the first century expected from their Messiah—a David, reincarnated, Judas Maccabeus to the Nth power.

Instead, the post-resurrection life of Jesus continues just as baffling, just as unexpectedly off-putting as was his life and ministry before the cross. “Peace be unto you,” he says, “*Shalom lachem*.” Functionally, this is simply the idiom used among Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking people as “hello,” as the Muslim Arabs of today greet each other *Salaam aleikum*. Of course, in this context, this understated, “Hello,” has a deeper resonance, drawing on the full meaning of the phrase. *Shalom* be upon you—the word for “peace” in the Semitic languages does not mean, in its root form, “lack of conflict,” but rather “wholeness, completeness, and perfection.” But what sort of wholeness. Forgive me a horrible pun, but the wholeness that Jesus comes to grant to His disciples is “hole-ness.” *And when he had said so, He showed them His hands and His side.*” Here is your completeness and your perfection.

*Then were His disciples glad when they saw the Lord*, we are told. Not before. At some deep level they understood that Jesus could not be Jesus without those scars. I'm reminded of a

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story told about St. Teresa of Avila, a famous sixteenth-century nun from Spain. According to the story, the Devil appeared to her in a number of visions to try her faith, appearing in various guises and disguises. In one instance, he even appeared in the form of Jesus, only to elicit from St. Teresa the wry remark: "O, it's just you again." *How did you know*, demands the tempter. "Because you have no wounds," she replies. The suffering of the cross, by which the sins of man are forgiven, and the Church is reconciled to God, was not a tool picked up by our Lord to be discarded, as if it were simply a means to an end. It has been eternally incorporated into the exalted humanity of the risen Christ. He is perfect as nothing else is perfect; He is the Incarnation of *Shalom* itself—and there are wounds in His hands and in His side.

A disciple is not to be above His master, and Jesus wastes little time in making the point very clear: *As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you*. In their joy at the appearance of the risen Savior, it's more than likely that the full significance of this charge went over their heads a little. He appears to them in order to bolster their faith, in order to confirm in their minds the sure and certain reality of the resurrection, but His commission, even in the joyous after-glow of the Easter miracle, is as serious and demanding as were His teachings to the disciples on the way up to Jerusalem. You too, He is saying, are sent as I was sent. This is what *Shalom* will look like. It will come as you also take up the cross, as you bear in your own body, as St. Paul writes much later, the dying of the Lord Jesus.

But it is not only patient suffering that He commands—it is even participation in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is for both of these ministries—for the bearing of our own cross, and for the forgiveness of sins—that Christ breathes out upon His disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. This little breath, this "miniature Pentecost," has always reminded me of something like starting a campfire. The spark is struck against the kindling, he who starts the fire breathes slowly but insistently to ignite the spark—and we know that the wood will burst into flame some fifty days later, in the noise of rushing wind and in tongues of flame.

The Holy Spirit is that Person of the Divine Trinity most closely associated with the Church herself. Unfortunately, while our language, with its pronouns, helps us to internally understand the personality of the Father and the Son—both are *He*—the Holy Spirit unfortunately gets an "it," both grammatically and, oftentimes, in our own thinking. "It" becomes an abstract concept, something like the gift of love or spiritual power which is bestowed onto us by God. This is to confuse the *charismata*—the gifts of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—with the Spirit itself, which is nothing less than God dwelling in and through His people. This Spirit effects the union of the disciple with Master, so that His ministry becomes our ministry, his wounds our wounds, his new definition of peace and perfection ours also.

If we have received of this Spirit, then our work is cut out for us, or rather, it is to be cut out of us. As Christ gave His body to be wounded for our transgressions, we also are to offer up our lives for the reconciliation of the world, for it is God's pleasure that the Church, as the Body of Christ and in which His Holy Spirit dwells, should share as members in the Redemptive Salvation wrought by Jesus Christ her Head and Governor. The union into which He has brought us, the closeness with which our Lord has clasped us to Him, makes any other situation impossible. And we ought to rejoice when that union and that closeness brings us into those places in life where we feel more keenly His wounds being formed in us, rather than feeling

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discouragement or abandonment. When our pride, our sense of dignity, our desire for gain at the expense of others, our self-sufficiency—when these things are crucified in us, we remember the Risen Lord whose hands and sides are pierced even now. These losses should not and do not mean the loss of our peace, our *Shalom*—but rather they are substantially essential to that Peace.

Now, I have not said anything about the retaining of sins—and that is the subject for a homily all its own. *Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.* I think I'm going to let that go for the present—suffice it to say that this is a further evidence of that closeness to God that is implied through the gift and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. This closeness and union is such that we are not only drawn, as the Church of Christ, into the ministry of Divine reconciliation and forgiveness, but also have a share in His judgment and justice. It is a tonic against that moral profligacy that has infected much of the Church today, which confuses the mercy of God with re-defining sin out of existence. That is not a ministry of reconciliation—rather, it makes forgiveness and reconciliation itself a logical impossibility.

*Whatsoever is born of God, writes St. John, overcometh the world. And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.* This faith refers not only to the content of a mental assertion—to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God—but to the indwelling of the Spirit in us, the witness that bears this record: *God hath given unto us eternal life—eternal Peace, everlasting Shalom—and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life.* Let us rejoice in our faith—our possession of the Son, whose wounds we are privileged to bear, through the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, which draws us into the acceptable and perfect Sacrifice of our Lord, to the glory of God our Father, who summons us now and forever to sit at His Bridegroom's table, in peace everlasting. *Shalom lachem + Amen.*