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The Significance of Jesus' Resurrection for Humans and the World

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Abstract: Christian faith is born out of two foundational experiences: "This Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and God" and "This Jesus was dead but rose again". The Christian faith-experience of God in Jesus Christ begins with the encounter of the first apostles and other disciples with Jesus as alive after he was crucified, died and was buried. This existential encounter transformed their entire lives that they began to experience God, other humans and the world in a way hitherto unknown to them. In the beginning they had no categories to articulate who Jesus was and what was his new mode of existence. Since they shared with their co-religionists the hope for an eschatological resurrection of all believers they interpreted their unique experience of Jesus as alive after his death as resurrection. In their encounter with Jesus they realized that he is the beginning and the end of their lives, the absolute meaning of their lives and, therefore, their Lord and God. In his resurrection they recognized the beginning and guarantee of the resurrection of all and the transformation of all things. Jesus' resurrection revealed that he is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire creation. The authors show that the resurrection of Jesus gives us an insight into the mystery of God, humans and the world. It demands from humans take responsibility for the world and that they confront structures and systems that attempt to thwart the actualization of the effects of resurrection for the entire humanity and for entire creation.

Keywords: God, Lord, Meaning and Mystery of Human Beings, Resurrection, Significance of Resurrection.

Christian faith is born out of two foundational experiences: “This Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and God” and “This Jesus was dead but rose again” (cf. Rom 10:9). The whole edifice of Christian Tradition is built on these foundations. Paul would emphatically assert that if there was no resurrection of Jesus, the believers in Jesus Christ are the ones most to be pitied (I Cor 15: 19). The proclamation about Jesus’ resurrection is the most prominent feature of Paul’s *gospel* (Rom 1:3f; 4:24f, 8:34, 10:9; I Cor 15:3-11; I Thess 1:10; II Tim 2:8)¹ Both human history and the entire creation enter into a new mode of existence because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That was the heart of the Christian proclamation. However, from the apostolic times there were people who could not accept the truth of resurrection. They would even ridicule those who believed in it and committed themselves to Jesus Christ and made claims that they had experienced him as alive after his death.

The anti-Christian propaganda since the birth of the Christian Church directed all its forces against proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and God and that he was murdered but overcame death and is alive. It continues even today! However, the Church understands and proclaims that the mystery of humans and their destiny in this world and beyond this world in relation to the mystery of God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, any theological reflection on the mystery of resurrection continues to evoke interest among all sections of the Christian believers.² The reality of the historical Jesus - his life, death and resurrection - is not only the hermeneutical principle to interpret the meaning of human existence here on earth and its ultimate destiny but also to have access to the Reality of God, “in whom we move, live and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead reveals who God is, what humans are,

what the world is and what the final destiny of humans and their world is.

I. Resurrection of Jesus Reveals God

Theological reflections on Jesus' resurrection from the dead oscillate between the so-called reasonably safe theological positions to presumptuous affirmations about the nature of God and popular misconception of identifying resurrection with resuscitation. Resurrection must reveal to us who God is. If resurrection is so fundamental to Christian belief it must be grappled with that it must lead us to an insight into the mystery of life and death that can be reasonably articulated. Therefore, the truth of resurrection lies between the two extremes: one that empties the meaning of resurrection and the other exaggerates it in such a way as to make it a happening of dubious nature.

There are theologians who would explain away the reality of resurrection or interpret the event in such a way that their theological opinions do not conform to the content of faith in resurrection, something that is believed as certain, lived and proclaimed by the Church. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, would not deny resurrection but affirms that the New Testament witness about resurrection is in a mythical language and therefore it is difficult to reach the reality expressed by it. The Easter event, according to him, is *not a historical event*. What can be understood and affirmed as a historical happening is the paschal faith of the first disciples.³ Resurrection is the experience of being liberated from sin and being existentially open to God and thus finding meaning in one's life. Therefore, Bultmann would affirm that "Christ is resurrected in the Kerygma". It is in the preaching about him that he is proclaimed to be alive so that people can choose to commit themselves to God and find the meaning of their

lives or close themselves against God and remain in the world of sin and meaninglessness.

It must be admitted that the resurrection of Jesus could not have been a historical event like that of the crucifixion. An historical event is a time and space bound occurrence. It was the obsession of the Western mind since the Enlightenment to recognize and accept something to be true only if it is historically verifiable. Since the resurrection of Jesus does not fall into a category which can be rationally verifiable, the tendency was to explain it in a way that makes some sense. But they lacked a world-view to experience and categories to explain a reality that is true but not historically verifiable. So they tried to explain it as a myth as understood in common parlance. Bultmann's attempt to demythologize NT narrations about Jesus was itself probably coming from this Western pre-occupation to reach the historically verifiable truths about Jesus' life and mission that it can be scrutinized by all and sundry. It is an illusion that one can historically prove the event of God becoming human and Jesus rising from the dead. What is historically verifiable is the consequences of the same. Against such a one-sided understanding of reality we must affirm that everything real need not necessarily be historical.

Willi Marxsen's theological reflection on resurrection went a step further to explain away the reality of resurrection by affirming that what is historically verifiable is the faith of the disciples as what happened to them in their personal life and as the continuance of 'cause of Jesus'⁴ in the functional level. Any charismatic leader or any revolutionary reformer continues to live after his death through his followers who are espoused to his ideals or what he stood for. They find their identity and meaning for their existence by totally committing themselves to the same cause. Here

again the problem of the reality of resurrection is not confronted. What was the event of resurrection, which is of utmost importance to the believers in terms that are different from what happened to themselves and the continuance of the cause of Jesus'?

Wolfgang Pannenberg⁵ begins from the pre-supposition that the historicity of faith of the disciples cannot be basis for the affirmation of the historicity of resurrection. Anything of importance to theological reflection must be a historical event or a fact that has three characteristics: it must be embodied in a tradition; it must be expressed in some language and finally it must respond to a metaphysical need or expectation of humans. According to him all these characteristics are found in the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Resurrection is experienced as the anticipation of the fulfilment of history by those who were waiting for the eschatological fulfilment of their lives. So Jesus' resurrection has a universal significance. For E. Schillebeeckx,⁶ resurrection can be explained as the disciples' interpretation of the Old Testament belief in the continued life of a just man, for example, like that of the innocent and just man of Wisdom 2:17 – 3:4, whose life of intimacy with God as his father and whose just life challenged the wicked who condemned him to a shameful death. What happened to the disciples after their encounter with the risen Jesus and the content of their proclamation about the person and message of Jesus shows that the resurrection of Jesus is more than a mere reflection of the disciples on the fate of a just man as Schillebeeckx claims.

For Leonardo Boff,⁷ resurrection of Jesus is the answer to the question whether death is more powerful than love or whether death or life is the final word of God on Jesus and all human beings. It is the realization of a hope that is present in all aspects of human life. It is the realization of the utopia,

which is not just an ideal but that which is realized here and now in our world, overcoming everything alienating, suffering, pain, hatred, sinfulness and death.

For Jon Sobrino, who makes a critical appraisal of some contemporary theological positions on resurrection proposes his own understanding of resurrection. He affirms that resurrection is the event that reveals God.⁸ Like the cross of Jesus reveals a God who suffers because he is love, resurrection reveals a God, who is just. If in the OT God is known not through his attributes but through his action of liberating his people from slavery, in the NT God is revealed through his action of raising Jesus from the dead. God's fidelity finds expression in the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples who encountered Jesus alive after his death understood the reality of resurrection from the horizon of the eschatological hope they shared with their people that finally God would vindicate the just and raise them from the dead. The disciples and those who recognized Jesus as a prophet with a difference, someone who is not just ordinary and committed themselves to follow him and his message, affirmed that God raised Jesus, who was unjustly condemned to a shameful death. In their encounter with the risen Jesus they realized that their whole life was transformed in such a way that they found the absolute meaning of their existence as the one who were experiencing their oneness with the risen Jesus and the entire universe. No wonder, then, they begin to believe and proclaim that his resurrection is the beginning of universal resurrection. "He is the first born from the dead" 'If he is risen we will also rise' etc. Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus reveals the justice of God and it gives us hope in a world of suffering caused by injustice, oppression and dehumanization. The justice of God that is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that is real

must be realized by hoping against hope in situations that call the resurrection of Jesus into question. This is possible only by a committed praxis sharing in God's concern for transforming this world into his kingdom.

If Boff's theological reflection on resurrection revolves around the inner certainty that humans have about the triumph of love and life over death and the surety of hope against hopelessness, for Sobrino it is the revelation of God's justice. Resurrection must reveal to us more than the fulfilment of that eschatological hope that gives meaning to human existence and the absolute certainty about the justice of God that challenges systems and structures of the world that attempt to thwart or destroy God's plan for humans. Resurrection must reveal to us who this God is who is involved in human history that affects God himself.

I propose an understanding of resurrection that hopefully responds to the question about this God who is involved in human history because I believe that all the aspects of the Christ-event must reveal to us who God is. If we believe in the radical relationship or the absolute inter-relatedness of God, humans and the world, the resurrection of Jesus reveals that this inter-relatedness of the entire reality is both historical and trans-historical. One can affirm that the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical event like his crucifixion. But resurrection happened to the historical reality of Jesus. In their encounter with him after his resurrection they recognized that there was a sort of continuity and discontinuity between the reality of Jesus in his historical existence and his trans-historical existence. He is alive but not the same way he was alive before his death. The recognition of him is not easy. The disciples' encounter with Jesus during his earthly life and their encounter with him as alive after his death were partly same and partly different. Yet they began to proclaim

boldly that he is alive and explained the same in categories of thought and language through which both the Jews and the Greeks could have access to the content of their proclamation. For Jews if one is alive he must eat and drink and have external marks which can identify him because the body-soul dichotomy is not a part of their anthropology. So the disciples would communicate to them about the risen Jesus in a language and idiom that would make the Jewish hearers understand that Jesus is a living reality. From the narration they would know that Jesus walked with the disciples after his resurrection, talked with them, ate with them and he showed them the marks of his wounds. So it is clear to the listeners that he is not only alive but also has an embodied existence. But for those who hold a Hellenistic world-view or for those who are influenced by this world-view it would be absurd to think that one who has transcended death and finiteness would live again in the limitedness of space and time. He is alive but he is beyond space and time. He lives but he is immortal and infinite. He might 'appear' as an embodied being but he is a spirit who could enter through the closed doors and would suddenly 'disappear' from the sight of the disciples. Paul, while comparing our new existence in Christ with our old existence in the flesh without him, speaks about the transition of Jesus from his historical existence to his trans-historical existence, distinct but not separate, not one mode of existence but also not two. This transition also affects our judgement about Jesus as the people regarded him from a human point of view during his historical existence. "Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now" (II Cor 5: 16, trans. Jerusalem Bible). The evangelists integrate both the Hebrew and Hellenistic world-views to communicate the truth of their encounter with Jesus after his death and burial

that Jesus is alive. They proclaimed that anyone who is open to him can encounter and experience him as the absolute meaning of their lives and indeed the Lord and God of their lives and the universe, 'the alpha and the omega' of the entire creation and everything is created 'through him and for him'(Col 1:16).

Both the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus reveal the radical inter-relatedness of God, humans and the world. If in the incarnation God reveals that his inter-relatedness with the creation and humans is historical and existential, the resurrection of Jesus reveals that this inter-relatedness is not limited to history but also transcends history. Both incarnation and the resurrection affect God. They affect our pre-conceived notions about God. It confronts systems and structures, whether religious, social, political or economical which manipulate the notions of God to destroy humans and the world.

The mode of God's being is in radical relationship with humans and their world. Therefore, God is not the Absolute Other, but the Ultimate in a radical relationship with all that exists. Everything that is human and everything that is material are different from God but not separated from him. God, being the ultimate source of everything, is distinct from everything that has existence (*ex-sistence*) from him. However, God and his creation are *not one* but also *not two*. Both the incarnation of the Word and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead are the manifestation of this unique relationship between God and his creation. If God were to be absolutely different from the entire creation, incarnation would not have been possible. It would be the same with the resurrection of Jesus.

II. Resurrection Reveals the Meaning of the Mystery of Humans

The transformation of Jesus from his embodied human existence with its space and time bound limitations to the ultimate horizon of the Lord of the Universe is the re-affirmation of God's plan of uniting everything in Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire creation. Can we not then recognize and understand the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the anticipation of the fulfilment of God's plan of leading humans and the universe to their final unfolding as intended by God? Does it not reveal to us that dimension of the mystery of God who created humans with the capacity to become and unfold in history and thus obtain deification to have eternal communion with him as Irenaeus of Lyons' anthropology would indicate? Neither the death of Jesus is the end of everything for him and for the world nor his resurrection the end, but the end is when God becomes all in all (II Cor 15:28) as Paul would affirm. Are not both incarnation and resurrection the once and for all manifestation of the mystery of God's plan for humanity and the world? The Letter to the Ephesians expressing Pauline theology would lead us to believe in such a plan of God (Eph 1: 9-10).

The Resurrection of Jesus reveals that the destiny of humans and their world is intrinsically related to God's being as God in relationship with everything that exists. In the resurrection of Jesus it was revealed that whatever is concrete and visible in history would be transformed into a trans-historical reality and that is the deeper dimension of the entire creation, both the material world and humans.

The early Christian community believed and proclaimed not only that God raised Jesus from the dead but also that

his resurrection was the beginning of the universal resurrection of all (1 Thess 4: 15, 17; 1 Cor 15: 51). Jesus, as the resurrected, is the 'first born of many brothers' and 'the first fruit' (Rom 8:11, 1 Cor 15: 20, Col 1:18; Acts 3:15; Rev 1:5). This implies that all will be resurrected because he was resurrected. It is not just an eschatological event to be realized in future but it has already begun as an experience of the 'newness of life' for those who have faith in him and what God has accomplished through him. And this faith is expressed through baptism (Rom 6: 4-5). Paul says that in baptism one dies with Christ, is buried with Christ and rises with Christ. The existence of the believer is *in him* and *with him*. The Hebrew theology of "corporate personality" might give an insight into this mystery of our being in relation to the risen Christ. The corporate personality is an inclusive personality in whom all humans who lived before this person and all humans who would live after and all those who are contemporaneous with this person are included in this person. If Jesus Christ is the absolute, decisive, definitive and unique manifestation of God's relation to humans and the world, the absolute symbol of everything that *exists*, then resurrection like incarnation reveals the mystery of the inter-relatedness of God, humans and the world. Thus, it reveals not only who God is but also the meaning of the mystery of humans and the entire creation.

The resurrection of Jesus gives us an insight into the mystery of humans because the one who rose from the dead is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, who was truly human besides being truly God as the council of Chalcedon (C.E. 451) confesses. The resurrection of Jesus reveals that humans and the world have not only a temporal existence, but they have an existence beyond history. Their existence cannot be thought of as separated from their ultimate source, namely, God, though humans can choose to alienate themselves from

him and find devices to destroy their world. Further, resurrection reveals the possibility of the ultimate unfolding of humans. It reveals that humans become truly humans to the extent they actualise what they truly are, through right relationships among themselves, with God and with the universe. If in resurrection what happened to one who was truly human could affect God himself, the entire humanity and the world itself because they are inter-related, it brings home to us that each human existence is valuable because it belongs to and affects the whole of reality. Precisely, because of this inter-relatedness, oppression, injustice, dehumanisation, discrimination in the name of religion, caste, class, gender, age etc. make those persons who practise these anti-kingdom values in their personal life or through systems and structures, less human as they become instruments of death and not resurrection. Therefore, in any decision of humans to unfold themselves as humans, in any struggle to fight against systems of dehumanisation and oppression, in any cross suffered as a consequence of standing for the values of the Kingdom the meaning and challenge of the resurrection of Jesus are revealed. An empowering insight into the mystery and destiny of humans as well as the hope that lets them have meaning to their suffering for others and for the well-being of the world is provided by the resurrection of Jesus who is the actualisation of the radical relationship of God, humans and the world.

III. Resurrection of Jesus and the Mystery of the World

Does the resurrection of Jesus reveal to us something about the mystery of this universe? Beyond the scientific explanations about what constitutes the material reality of the universe, are there other dimensions of the universe which are significant to humans for their own self-understanding

and for their relationship with the universe? The biblical testimony from the first book Genesis about the creation of the universe (Gen 1:1) to the last book Revelation which speaks about the coming of the 'new heavens and the new earth' (Rev.21:1) affirms that the universe is related to God and humans and its destiny is inseparably connected with the destiny of human beings. If the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14) and dwelt among us, and if 'everything is created in him and through him' (Col 1:5- 17) the cosmos or the material dimension of the cosmos possesses a God-given quality to be related to God and humans in such a way that humans can have an embodied existence in this world and God can become human in the God-created world.

When Paul attempts to explain the question about the resurrection of the body, he speaks about a physical body (I Cor 15: 44) and a spiritual body. By his assertion that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom' (I Cor 15:50) probably he was opposing the earlier crude understanding of resurrection yet at the same time trying to synthesise the Hellenistic and Hebraic understanding of Jesus' bodily resurrection. While not denying that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection he attempted to show that this body was a spiritual body because Jesus is raised to another mode of his being. According to J.D.G.Dunn, Paul seemed to have been influenced by certain Gnostic categories of thought which the Fathers of the Church later tried to overcome. The Fathers affirmed that 'it was the physical body, precisely the flesh that was raised'⁹ But it is reasonable to conclude that the Fathers are speaking about the transformation of the physical body, the flesh. Paul himself speaks about the longing of the creation for its liberation and affirms that the creation will be graced to share the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

The resurrection of Jesus inaugurates that liberation of the entire cosmos. The radical inter-relationship of the world

with humans and God is thus revealed in the resurrection of Jesus because Jesus in his humanity as a 'microcosm' is resurrected. The significance of the entire creation is that it is radically related to God and humans. The fact of the 'empty tomb' - which is a confirmation of resurrection because the disciples believed in the resurrection not because they found the tomb empty but because they encountered Jesus as alive – probably indicates the destiny of the material reality to be transformed by God. Already because of incarnation and resurrection material reality has received a new dimension to its being as matter. It has become an essential element of the sacraments.

The revelation of the meaning and the mystery of the universe through the resurrection of Jesus places tremendous responsibility on humans to care for creation and to approach universe with a contemplative attitude and recognize it as revealing God and the destiny of humans. In any wanton destruction of the resources of world one can detect an inhuman and ungodly attempt to break the inter-relationship of God, humans and the world. And in all movements that struggle through just means to protect the earth and its resources we can detect the presence of hope in the resurrection..

Conclusion

The Christian faith-experience of God in Jesus Christ begins with the encounter of the first apostles and other disciples with Jesus as alive after he was crucified, died and was buried. This existential encounter transformed their entire lives so that they began to experience God, other humans and the world in a way hitherto unknown to them. In the beginning they had no categories to articulate who Jesus was and what was his new mode of existence. Since they shared with their co-religionists the hope in an eschatological resurrection of all believers they interpreted

their unique experience of Jesus as alive after his death as resurrection. In their encounter with Jesus they realized that he is the beginning and the end of their lives, the absolute meaning of their lives and, therefore, their Lord and God. In his resurrection they recognized the beginning and guarantee of the resurrection of all and the transformation of all things. Jesus' resurrection revealed that he is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire creation. Thus the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives as an insight into the mystery of God, humans and the world. It reveals who God is, what humans are and what they can become, and what the world is. It challenges humans to live the radical inter-relationship with God and the world and create situations in which humans can unfold themselves as humans experiencing wholeness offered by the resurrection of Jesus. It demands from humans that they take responsibility for the world, and confront structures and systems that attempt to thwart the actualization of the effects of resurrection for the entire humanity and for the entire creation.

Notes

1. J.D.G.Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2nd Edition, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 22.
2. For a summary of the contemporary discussion on the theme of Resurrection with relevant references see A. Pragasam, "The Resurrection of Jesus in Contemporary Theology," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 70/4 (April, 2006):249 -259.
3. R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H-W Bartsch, tr., R.H Fuller, London: S.P.C.K., 1972, pp.35 -42
4. W. Marxsen, *Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, pp. 147-148.
5. W. Pannenberg, "Dogmatische Erwagnungen zur Auferstehung Jesu," *Kerygma und Dogma*, 14 (1968): 105- 118
6. E.Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, New York: Crossroad Publ., 1979.
7. L.Boff, *Jesus the Liberator*, New York: Orbis Books, 1978.
8. J.Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American View*, London: SCM Press, 3rd Impression, 1984, p. 240.
9. J.D.G.Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2nd Edition, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 290.