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It seems to be a universal human trait that we like to categorize people and things. I guess it is part of our search for getting some sort of control of the world in which we live. Scientists are doing it all the time, trying to piece together more and more information that is being generated by experiments. That Hadron Collider on the border between Switzerland and France has been in the news recently. The hidden particle which mathematically seemed to be required to make sense of matter as we know it has been experimentally proven to exist. Its name Higgs-Boson is a hybrid of the names of the two physicists whose work predicted its existence. I read an article on the actual working of the Collider and the figures of its activity and structure are breathtaking. It operates at a degree or two above absolute zero. It has two beams circling the pathway of the collider so many million times a second going in opposite directions, their direction being adjusted fractionally at a certain place in the collider so that they crash into each other and generate this effect to prove the existence of this previously unproven particle. Don't ask how much it cost to construct! But the fact that benefactors and governments around our world are willing to put billions of dollars into its construction and functioning is witness to this passion we have to get a handle on our world.

We are always categorizing. We do it very quickly with people. We like to put people into categories. Left wing – right wing. Evangelical – liberal. Carlton – Collingwood. And of course, all such categorizations are distortions. I may barrack for Carlton but let's hope there is a lot more to me than just that. But for the purposes of putting someone into a box, such titles are handy. When you read the opening verses of our gospel passage, that would appear to be what Herod is trying to do; putting Jesus into a category which makes sense of what he is hearing. Those verses are something of an introduction to the gruesome story which follows. They relate to Herod trying to categorize Jesus especially in view of his having had John beheaded.

(read Mark 6:14-16)

As far as I know Jesus and John looked nothing alike. So when Herod proposes that this other bloke meandering the country and preaching is actually John the Baptist he does not mean that literally. The principle behind a claim like those made in these verses – about Jesus being someone else who has lived previously – is not that the original person has literally risen up out of their grave and was walking around Palestine. It is rather that the dead person can rise from the dead as the empowerment of other persons to do and say what the dead person once did. Now this may surprise some but that is quite probably exactly how Mark understands the resurrection of Jesus. You may recall that at the ending of Mark's gospel there is not one appearance story in his resurrection narrative: Jesus appears to no-one. Later generations of Mark's readers worked hard at supplying the ending which they thought Mark should have written. There are a number of less textually reliable endings which have been added and any good translations will probably indicate them in the margin. And of course, Matthew and Luke, reflecting later generations of tradition, have quite explicit narratives of appearances.

The point is that in that religious culture, it was quite conceivable that a previous figure from history could be manifested again in the life and words of someone else. It is against that background that Herod makes this categorization of Jesus as John being manifest in Jesus.

The weekend away with our kids and their kids got me thinking about one's place in the scheme of things. Each of my kids has all my DNA combined with all of Jeannie's DNA mixed together in a combination which is unique, and yet somehow is a manifestation of us. I recall returning to Lockington church – my first placement - some years after we left there. In the interim our daughter Stephanie had been born. Her grandmother, Jeannie's Mum, lived in the area and was known to one of the members of the congregation. Steph would have been about 4 years old. Immediately after we walked in Cyril, this bloke who knew Jeannie's mum, took one look at Steph and said: "Wow. Annie McKerrow will never be dead while that one is alive." Well that's one way in which some of us who have been parents actually inhabit the lives of others.

There is a chorus that is based on a verse in Galatians. It runs something like “It’s no longer I that liveth, but Christ that liveth in me.” A good many of us will have sung that but I wonder what we actually mean when we sing those words. In what sense is Christ in us? We can trot out those phrases rote with very little thought as to what we are saying and meaning. Well let me suggest that the meaning of such statements may not be disconnected from the discoveries being made in CERN in Switzerland with that Hadron Collider. I read a fascinating article on the growing evidence in science that everything is connected to everything else...that the fundamental nature of reality is increasingly being seen to be a material interplay between energies lying behind what we know as solid matter. Leon Lederman, a physicist, is known as the author of the phrase “The God Particle” in characterizing the Higgs-Boson phenomenon. That’s not actually true: he in fact called it the “God-damn particle”, not least because it was such a conundrum. However, a less expressive physicist gave a clear description of the significance of the particle. He said (and I quote): “the God particle is at the center of everything...it talks to all other particles in some fundamental way”. The author of the article I read reflecting on this discovery wrote:

“We are on the verge of something provocative that suggests that separation and alienation – whether ethnic, political, economic, spiritual, or global – are illusions, the fabrications of survival-driven egos and the need to dominate by knowledge, power, or possession. All of a sudden Brahman-Atman, the Buddha nature, the Tao, the Great Spirit and the Christ, make sense as the energy of love, in the sense of interdependence that joins all creation as one yet many. The songlines of the universe chant a melody of love!”

There is so much more that I would love to develop on this theme, but let me summarise thus: if the discoveries of science are showing us that all things and all people are connected at this fundamental level of existence, let us beware of any thinking, and especially any theological thinking which draws barrier lines between people. We may be different on superficial criteria; focus there and you have arrogant judgements based on such ultimately irrelevant differences. Focus however on that deeper level of reality: that we all share a common existence, a common life and such differences quickly fade into beautiful expressions of a glorious connection we share with all people and all things.

But I want to spend some time on this difficult passage in the gospel before I finish. Preachers are never sure what to do with this rather gruesome story. Might I suggest that modern preachers are not alone there. The authors of Matthew and Luke, the first one’s to work with Mark’s material, also struggled to make sense of how this passage fits into Mark’s larger story. That is seen in the fact that Matthew – who usually expands what Mark provides – has shortened the story considerably. Luke omits it altogether. Indeed, I dislike this story; not for its gory detail, but for its implications about what we may expect from faithful living. We want stories like a number of others in the gospels where God, in the person of Jesus, steps in and prevents awful things happening to his followers, such as stilling a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Yet here in this story is a shocking miscarriage of justice born of political intrigue and entrenched hatred perpetrated against a faithful servant of God.

At its most basic level we need to hear this story because it isn’t all that different from many of the stories we read about in the papers or watch on TV. Few of us would not have become aware of the execution of that poor woman in Afghanistan ostensibly for adultery. No court case. No listening to what defence might have been provided by a legal expert. And, I hope you noticed, no word about the adulterous man involved because I suspect it still takes two to commit adultery. She is surrounded by this group of Taliban men...all men.. and riddled with bullets from a machine gun. At its most basic level, that event is no different from what happened to John the Baptist. So, let’s not put this story in a category all of its own: what happened to John is happening in our world every day.

The basic question always to be asked of a passage in interpreting it is “What does the author wish us to hear through this story? What is his purpose in including it?” Luther once wrote that we need to squeeze a gospel passage until it yields good news. Well, I’m not sure there is much good news for ordinary people in this story as such, only in its wider context of Jesus’ story. In

fact, this is the one scene of any length in Mark's gospel in which Jesus makes no appearance. But let me suggest two things that Mark may be saying through the story.

Perhaps he is suggesting that the ministry of the one of whom he is writing his bigger story, like the ministry of John, has significant political implications. By that I don't mean micro political in the sense of who you vote for, which party you support. Rather in the sense that the kingdom message challenges the status quo and the power structures that support that status quo. I was raised in the home of a country policeman. Deep within me is this thing about the law always being right; the government is not to be questioned and the decisions of those in power must be right because such people always make right decisions. I lived with an easy acquiescence with that cultural presumption that might is right. And then I went to Monash University in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At which time my two brothers were called up in that cynical piece of legislation based on a lottery of birthdates which reintroduced conscription into our nation without any mandate from the people. The whole strategy was designed to provide human fodder for the Viet Nam War. And for the first time in my life I came to understand that power – whether political, economic, military – can be not just wrong but corrupt. “Might” did not make “right”. And I joined somewhere over 100,000 others in the Moratorium March against the Viet Nam war in the centre of Melbourne.

Friends, if we think being part of the church is being part of an organisation committed to the status quo in our society then we are in the wrong group. Any reading of the gospels is saying that the one we follow challenged the values by which the rich and powerful operated in his world, and lost his life for doing so, as did his forerunner John. Which leads to the second thing Mark may be wanting to say through this passage. Perhaps he also wants his readers to be aware: that this is the way of the world in which we live; that those who stand up to power often take a beating and worse. Those who advocate an alternative to the status quo can usually expect that those who benefit from the status quo will react and try and suppress them. One of the people in our world who knows that best is that magnificent woman from Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi. How many years was she confined to her home by the military junta? She obviously knew what the author of this gospel knew: that there would be a reaction to her words and her work. But she never gave up and with enormous courage kept up her challenge to the power elite of her country which tried to silence her.

Mark may well have been writing his gospel shortly after the fall of Jerusalem: an event in which the brutal power of Rome was seen in the massive destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of thousands of its people. We cannot get any glimpse really of what that would have done to a faithful Jewish believer who had an idea that God would protect God's temple and God's people. And as Mark writes this story of Jesus he is seeing the reality around him with new eyes such that even Jesus will be subject to the corrupt and cruel forces of the world in which he lives.

So what is the good news in this story? Well, Luther said that, not me. I think we need to place this story into its wider context: that is, this story is not the whole story; that the Jesus story is telling us that such stories as this are part of something more: something beyond the heartache and intrigue and tragedy of the Herod's of this world. The Jesus story tells us that there is a better ending to our stories and the story of our world than we can ever imagine or construct on our own. I guess, to quote a lovely film that our kids relished: we are part of a “Never Ending Story”. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves, a story being written by the author if it all. But as with that lovely movie, to be part of the story you have to engage the narrative. In other words, that truth is not meant to make us acquiesce but the very opposite.

Let me conclude by saying this: When something which seemed inviolate – such as the temple was for the author of this book – is destroyed, or when your marriage is ending, or you've lost your job, or you fear your child will never speak to you again...the possibility of another ending, a bigger story is not just good news; it is the best news you can imagine. Friends we are part of a never ending story and our challenge is to engage that story with the same courage as the One who went before us and who has written the end of our stories, ends of which we can only dream.