

What is my Galilee?

In his Easter homily in 2014, Pope Francis spoke about what he calls each person's 'personal Galilee'. Galilee is the area in the Holy Land, Israel, where Jesus spent his adult life. In the little towns and villages and in the countryside around the Sea of Galilee he taught and healed and brought God's forgiveness and love to people. There, as he wandered from place to place he gave hope to the people he encountered. He restored them to fullness of life when they were marginalised, rejected and cut off from life in any way. He did this in a very personal and indeed intimate way - a touch, a look, a word, forgiveness. It is also where he called people to follow him. Often that call came at an inconvenient moment. We have stories of those who said, 'Wait, I have something to do first'. Some, on the other hand, leaped up straight away and left everything and followed him into the unknown. Of others, we hear that they just could not respond, it asked too much of them. But to whoever that call came, it was an offer of life, hope, joy. Whoever received that touch, that word, that forgiveness, knew what it was to have life to the full. And from that moment on everything was different.

Pope Francis said: "‘To go to Galilee’ means something beautiful, it means drawing new energy from the sources of our faith and our Christian experience. To return to Galilee means above all to return to that blazing light with which God's grace touched me at the start of the journey. From that flame I can light a fire for today and every day, and bring heat and light to my brothers and sisters. That flame ignites a humble joy, a joy which sorrow and distress cannot dismay, a good, gentle joy. Returning to Galilee means treasuring in my heart the living memory of that call, when Jesus passed my way, gazed at me with mercy and asked me to follow him. It means reviving the memory of that moment when his eyes met mine, the moment when he made me realize that he loved me".

And he went on to say: "Today ... each of us can ask: What is my Galilee? Where is my Galilee? Do I remember it? Have I forgotten it? Have I gone off on roads and paths which made me forget it? Lord, help me: tell me what my Galilee is; for you know that I want to return there to encounter you and let myself be embraced by your mercy".

Francis certainly has a beautiful way of expressing our need to constantly let hope and joy and purpose into our lives. And he points to something crucial. We need to be aware of the well-spring, the *source* of our joy and peace and hope. And we need to return there, often.

We all know that we sometimes need to remind ourselves why we made particular choices, our profession or career path, for example, and to connect once again with the passion, gift and enthusiasm that set us out along that particular path. I think this is why couples sometimes choose to renew their marriage vows after years of marriage. In doing this they become again the two people who set out together, inspired and led by love for each other, by hope,

optimism and a vision of life together. They return to the source of their married lives as they remember and re-tell their story, and set out again. This is far more than something that happens in a head space. It is more than a well thought out decision. It is about *knowing* again. It is a knowing in the fullest sense of the word - remembering, re-living, being once again immersed in that 'moment'. You may be familiar with the writings of Marcel Proust, the great French philosopher and writer. In his work, "A la recherche du temps perdu" ("In Search of Lost time"), he tells of how, as an adult, he one day dipped a madeleine into his tea and in a flash of vision an entire world of memory, experience, a 'moment' long past and somewhat forgotten, came to him and he was 'there' again. In doing something - dipping the madeleine into the tea - which he had done often as a child, that whole world of childhood, now long gone, came back to him. I have always loved Proust's account of this experience because the world of the senses has such great power - a glimpse, a sound, a smell, a taste, touch, often penetrate most profoundly in a non-verbal and quite irrational, or probably better to say, trans-rational, way.

I think this is why Francis uses expressions such as, 'return to that blazing light with which God's grace touched me' and 'when his eyes met mine', and he speaks of 'treasuring in my heart the living memory of that call'. 'I want to return there to encounter you', he says. This is an encounter which embraces us completely and touches us on every level of our being. Marcel Proust could have simply *remembered* how he used to dip the madeleine into the tea, but when he actually did it, when he 'returned there', we might say, he entered once again that world which had been everything for him at one time. And the depth of it opened up to him. The same is true of our encounter with God's grace.

There is a religious or spiritual worldview, or approach to life, we can have that is very much a rational thing, what we might call religious philosophy. It may be very well considered and may certainly provide us with meaning and purpose and answer those fundamental questions we all ask. But to live deeply a life in faith we need to go further than simply holding to creedal statements. The great beauty of Christianity is that it is at heart an encounter, a relationship. This is deeply personal, intimate, and we are invited into it in a wholehearted way. This encounter is with God, through Jesus, the Christ, and we speak of it as the Resurrection-mystery or Resurrection-experience. So why is Resurrection about encounter?

If we set out to look for consistency in the 'facts' of the Resurrection stories we will not find many. Was there one angel in the tomb or two? Or no one at all? Who exactly did go to the tomb that morning? And did they encounter Jesus there or didn't they? What we need to do is let the power and invitation of these stories speak to us. In John's story, we find Mary Magdalene, distraught, confused, looking for her Lord in the tomb, but not finding him there. And then a breakthrough moment - an encounter. She recognized him, not physically, for she mistook him for the gardener, but as he called her name. An intimate moment, and I imagine

one she knew well. In Luke's story, two men fleeing Jerusalem after the crucifixion, in fear and desolation, their hopes dashed, and they recognized him, not physically either, for they thought he was a stranger who had fallen into step with them along the road, but when they sat down to a meal and he broke the bread, they knew. Something they had experienced often – a meal shared, bread broken. Jesus' friends huddled in the Upper Room in fear lest they meet the same fate, afraid, wondering what to do. And then he was there. Not the flesh and blood man they had known, for they thought he was a ghost. But he offered them peace and something happened, their courage returned, they got up and went out and so the Church began to take shape. Their lives were transformed. For all of them, from that moment, everything was different.

This is Resurrection-Mystery, Resurrection-Experience. This story, in its various accounts, is the 'Galilee moment' of the Church. It is that empowering story we return to constantly as a community of faith. And so we tell this story every year, and we have six weeks set aside to ponder it. What in fact does it mean for me to encounter the risen Christ? How can I let that transformation from darkness to light happen in all the realities of my life? What in my life is in need of grace, healing, needs a word of life, a touch, forgiveness, that look of compassion and love? What paths have I wandered onto and what have I forgotten? It is when we look within and let ourselves be drawn into this encounter that we move from knowing *about* Resurrection to *knowing* the risen Christ. And as Francis says, it is all about a look, an invitation, a call - grace, that blazing light.

In his letter in the New Testament, Peter writes: "Do not be afraid, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts". To do this, is to surrender to that look, to that embrace. Again and again, we are invited to let ourselves be captured, taken by surprise. And for each of us on this journey into faith there will be a moment, an experience, an insight or a slow coming to know ... that will most surely be our particular way into it, our particular 'Galilee moment'. It is a wonderful thing to simply sit and remember this, and set out again and again.

Kerry McCullough
Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator