



Inner Holy Week

Exploring Easter from
the Inside

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This little book is a compilation of a series of emails I wrote for Holy Week 2018.

They were originally written to be read during the week, so there are some reflections on the felt energy of the week which won't be so accessible or relevant if you're reading this at another time of year.

I hope it's useful no matter when you read it.

+ Tim

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Cover Image: *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (detail), Salvador Dali, 1951

Introduction

Here in Australia, there are two Easters.

For the vast majority of Australians, Easter is a fantastic, four-day, holiday weekend. You get two short working weeks, with the longest, long weekend in the middle. Ideal for getting away to the beach before it gets too cold. Also, chocolate.

For conventional Christians, Easter couldn't be more different. This is the most significant of Christian festivals. The great drama of the Passion narrative. The great triumph over death that is the resurrection. Darkness, light, betrayal and hope. It is the most central story of faith and belief.

This Easter, what I'd like to offer you is a different, perhaps a third way to approach the mystery of Holy Week. An Inner approach, if you like.

Let's stop paying any attention to the Gospel story as a pseudo-historical story about actual people, real politics and betrayal, and authentic miracles. Instead, let's imagine that all the events symbolise an inner reality in the human interior. In your interior and mine as well.

The key to this "Inner Holy Week" is to read the Gospel and understand that Jesus is the unfolding Self. The people around him, both friends and foes are aspects of the thinking mind – thoughts, if you like. Heaven is Spirit. Hell is Matter. The whole drama of the Passion is the story of the awakening of the Human Being, exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

If you're up for it, I invite you to read the Gospel for yourself alongside these emails. I'll provide some pointers I think work, but I suggest you treat these as suggestions and feel into your own sense of an Inner Holy Week. Each day, I'll suggest a little piece of the Bible to read, some points and something to reflect on.

Aside from all this mental work, please make sure you get some quiet space this week and just notice how you feel in your body, in the energy of the body, if that makes sense to you, as the week unfolds.



Palm Sunday

King of Israel!

The Sunday before Easter, which really kicks off Holy Week, we call [Palm Sunday](#) and it recalls an incident retold across all four Gospels. John's is brief and tells it thus,

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

– John 12:12-16

It's worth your time to take a look at the others: [Matthew 21:1-11](#), [Mark 11:1-11](#), [Luke 19:28-44](#).

Conventional Christians sometimes do a kind of re-enactment of all this with palm fronds. Or at least, decorate the church with palm fronds. Some of those palm leaves are kept, dried and burned to make the ashes for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the following year. *This is a clue.*

So, how does this fit the "inner" interpretive frame I'm suggesting?

This whole scene is the human being. The Self (Jesus) is seated on a donkey (the body). He is surrounded by a "great crowd" telling him he's great, he's the King of Israel! But the whole thing rings hollow. A king on a donkey?

In Gnostic terms, this is the Archonic system trying to recruit the Self into the big deception. In more modern terms, the crowd is just regular material thoughts of social and material success, trying to recruit the Self into conventional ego-functioning. Either way, they're a distraction.

The priest applies the Ash Wednesday ashes with the words, "Remember, O man, that dust you are and to dust you shall return." The palm fronds seem like honours, but the whole pantomime is just materiality and death.

The Self, of course, sees through the whole charade. And goes forward.

Reflection

How do you read that passage as symbolising your inner life?

Can you sense that inner pantomime between the fantasies of importance or success (maybe your own definition of success, rather than society's) and a deeper sense of your Self?

Who is the you which is not tempted? Which is drawn deeper?

Can you already feel a shift in the energy around you this week? What is that like?

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Maundy Thursday

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Maundy Thursday recalls two key events:

- *the Last Supper* – the Passover meal where Jesus gives his final teachings ([John 13-17](#)), including the prototype of the Eucharist ritual, and
- *the Garden of Gethsemane* – where he is betrayed, arrested and taken to be judged.

Both events are important and they work together.

The Passover meal ([Matthew 26:17-35](#)) establishes the idea that the apostles are meant to be carrying on his work. They are his closest pupils and dearest friends. He loves them and commands them to love each other.

Then, at the Garden ([Mark 14:32-52](#), is typically terse), Jesus asks one thing of them: Stay awake with me while I pray. He's distressed, he knows what Judas is up to, he knows the end is near.

... And they can't do it. He makes three attempts to get them to stay awake, but they fall asleep each time. They fail in everything he asks of them and they certainly fail to keep him safe from the soldiers.

So, what is going on? If we stay with my "inner provocation", how can we make sense of this?

Jesus is the Self, as I suggested last time. Just as the "great crowd" on Palm Sunday symbolise regular, materially-oriented thoughts, the apostles are "*spiritual thoughts*" – the kind of thoughts we love to think make us spiritual people. Thoughts we ingest from spiritual books, thoughts we fill our minds with by praying and thinking pious, devout religious things. *Good thoughts*.

The apostles are kind of clueless, they're slow on the uptake, they're not following what he's saying, they come up with dumb ideas ("... not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" says Peter). Then when he really needs help, they're useless.

It's like that with these kinds of spiritual thoughts. They seem like they're best friends to our spiritual life, but in fact they're kind of useless. They aren't there at your darkest moments. They don't really get you anywhere. In fact, like the disciples, rather than helping you get where you yearn to go, they mostly want you to stay with them. Just like the "great crowd" from Palm Sunday, they're trying to recruit the Self into conventional ego-functioning.

The Self is disappointed (how much time did we put into these thoughts!?), but sees through the whole charade. And goes forward.

Reflection

Have you had this experience of being disappointed by "good thoughts", perhaps even being betrayed by them?

Can you sense that the desire to stay at this egoic level of functioning – even if it's a really nice, lovely, "spiritual" kind of egoic functioning – is preventing you from going deeper?

Who is the you which is not tempted? Which is drawn deeper?

Can you feel a deeper shift in the energy in and around you as Thursday comes to a close? What is it asking of you? What does it draw out?

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Good Friday

What is truth?

Good Friday. The trial ([John 18](#)). His death ([John 19](#)).

Go read it. I'll wait.

This is the big guns. The [Rulers](#) themselves – the High Priest and his court, the (weirdly sympathetic) Roman Governor – all demanding that he confess or defend himself. He does neither. The real demand is that he should fear them and comply. This is always what Rulers ask of us.

We learn fear and obedience early. These great powers are some of the oldest, earliest parts of the psyche. The hardest game to see through. As I write this, my partner is in the other room, listening to a TED talk about the effects of spanking children. We learn fear and obedience from those who love us most.

As the story builds, all the prior pieces join in,

- The great crowd from Palm Sunday arrive, but in place of "Hosanna!" they shout "Crucify him!"
- The apostles (signified by Peter) are there, but where before they begged him not to leave, now Peter denies even knowing him.

We know where the Self (Jesus) is going – the cross. Of course, the ego-dynamics of the psyche (we've met materiality – the crowd, religiosity – the apostles, and fear and obedience – the rulers) want none of that. Everything lines up against the Self's determined journey.

You've met a basic version of this just trying to meditate!

What might not be obvious is where God seems to be. Through the entire Gospel, pretty much no matter what happens to Jesus, God seems to be with him. This, we imagine, is the source of his unshakeable resolve, his ability to speak the truth, his total certainty. His unity with the Father allows him to heal the sick, the blind and the lame and raise the dead.

Where is God now? The crowd and the rulers take the opportunity to point this out. Here's Mark ([15:27-32](#)):

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Oh ye of little faith! Imagining that God is gone, simply because there's no outward signs! But it isn't merely outward signs. It turns out there really is no sign – Jesus is actually abandoned. Mark again, just one verse later ([Mark 15:33-34](#)):

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

This is actually very weird. It's a very human moment, very relatable – so we tend to nod, empathetically. But it's not a very Jesus moment. Up to this moment, we have never seen a Jesus who was not in union with the Father. What's up with this?

I have a few ideas, but (even though the crucifixion happened the same day as this) let's talk about it tomorrow when we talk about Death.

Reflection

Have you had an experience where just about everything in you is telling you to turn back, but something deep urges you forward? Did you heed it or do you wish you had?

Do you have the sense that God is with you? Is it intermittent or constant? Have you ever felt that presence leave? How did that feel?

What is the energy of Good Friday – around you or within you or both? What is it asking of you? What does it draw out?

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Easter Saturday

It is finished.

Where were we? Abandonment. Betrayal. John ([19:26-27](#)) leaves Jesus one last thing to let go of – his mother and his Beloved Disciple.

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”

... and that's pretty much that (John 19:30),

Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Two key words there –

- "finished" (Τετέλεσται) might be better as "completed" or, accounting for tense and voice, "it has been completed",
- "gave up" (παρέδωκεν) more commonly "hand over" or even "betray" – exactly the same term consistently used of Judas's actions.

I keep using the term "Self". When I use it, I mean the internal energy system that orients all thought and action towards itself. It's deeper than what we typically call the Ego – which are the internal processes that sustain the delusion that the Self is separate from others and from God. Jesus in the Gospels is never depicted as an Ego. But he is a Self.

To stay with my interpretation, the death of Jesus must be the death or the end of the Self. Is that crazy-talk? If it is, it's traditional crazy-talk. The end of the Self is the spiritual stage which happens after union – but don't be confused by the way this seems to get talked about. This isn't the end of being a person, it isn't absorption into an empty void or a loss of individuality into God. But it is the cessation of that internal energy system. A complete transformation of one's way of being human.

This helps to understand where God went. To feel in relationship to God, to have the sense of union, requires a self and an other. An I and a Thou. As the energy of I is extinguished, the Thou seems to disappear as well. Writings of the saints often describe the presence of God disappearing for a period, but this is a more profound loss that is said to never return.

Stepping outside the text of the Gospel, the Apostle's Creed states that after dying on the cross, but before rising, Jesus "descended into the lowest". There's a long tradition that on Easter Saturday he descends to Hell. Peter says he...

... went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits — to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

– 1 Peter 3:19-20

I love this tradition. In the language of Inner Holy Week, this points to the subconscious or the Shadow – where aspects of the psyche dissociated earlier in life continue to dwell and vex us. Spiritual transformation doesn't give you a free ride with this buried material – it still needs healing – though perhaps it gives you more powerful and effective tools for when you do find yourself facing it.

So I love the irony of his last words, "It is finished". The work required to reach the end of Self is done, yet there still seems to be a lot to do. The first steps of which continue tomorrow, "... very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise ..."

See you then.

Reflection

Can you make sense of the distinction between Ego – the certainty of separateness – and Self – the internal energy that magnetises your awareness – in your own experience?

Perhaps your Ego system is intact, or perhaps it has begun to flicker out, or maybe it has collapsed and you experience continuous Union. But your Self is still there, as strong as ever. The loss of it is unimaginable.

Do you hold a hope that spiritual life will magically fix your Shadow? Or do you work with it consciously?

This interpretation of the story puts the suffering of Jesus and of his family and friends in the background. How are you finding your reaction to that? Does it feel wrong to ignore all that at Eastertime?

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Easter Sunday

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

You know the story. You've heard it hundreds of times. The visit to the tomb, early in the morning. The various what-the-hecks – the stone rolled away, the binding cloths rolled up, the two mysterious men in "clothes that gleamed like lightning". And that heart-wrenching scene, which only John (20:15-16) has, where Mary Magdalene encounters a stranger at the tomb,

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out, "Rabboni!"

Reading that loud, as I have done pretty much every Easter Sunday for years, I choke up. It seems like I can feel Mary's heart as she cries out – that potent combination of grief and relief and adoration for her beloved teacher.

So, of course, Jesus says,

Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

– John 20:17

... which is important. But we'll get to that.

Right now, here's what seems important: He is risen!

The overwhelming importance of Easter for many Christians is the proof of everlasting life. Jesus died and rose again and he promises us new life too. The resurrection is the ultimate Sign that his teaching is the Way, that his Word is Truth. So many capital letters!

The purpose of this series of brief notes isn't to deny or diminish other interpretations of the Gospel story. I think that the ability to seriously tussle with multiple, conflicting interpretations of scripture is a crucial skill in a mature spiritual life. To do that, we need to acknowledge the centrality of the mainstream narrative and, for a little while, shunt it gently to the side.

From the inner perspective which I'm indicating, this whole thing is curious. The crucifixion symbolised the Self – the inner energy of the self-system – becoming extinguished. So what gives with it returning?

First, we have to note that this Risen Jesus isn't quite the same as the Jesus we knew before. He's hard to recognise – Mary, his closest disciple, doesn't know who he is, the disciples on the Emmaus road don't know him either. He appears, suddenly, inside locked rooms. And he teaches a lot more directly than he used to.

He also isn't around a lot of the time. He kind of flickers in and out of view. When he's there he seems to be preparing the disciples. He clearly isn't around for long, he's getting them ready for life without him there.

While previously, their lives all faced him – because that's what disciples do – he's preparing them for a life turned outward, facing the world.

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

– Mark 16:15

I think many of us, when we begin spiritual life or after we've had some nice meditation experiences, develop a fantasy of what the end of it all must be like. All the thoughts must cease, all the wounds are healed and you can finally be your True Self.

But the Gospel points us to a different conclusion. The disciples are still there. The rulers are still there. The great crowd is still populating Jerusalem. It's Jesus who is going.

And the way in which He goes reorganises everything.

See you tomorrow.

Reflection

How does it feel to engage with the Easter story like this? Is it hard or easy?

What do you miss about the way you've understood it before?

What do you imagine the end of the spiritual journey is like for you? Does that vision pull you forward?

Can you sense a different way that emerges for you from this "inner perspective"? What's that like to sense?

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Easter Monday

Feed my lambs

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

– Mark 16:19-20

Although John and Matthew don't mention it, Mark and Luke add this "taken up into heaven" bit to the end of the Easter story. The church remembers this in the Ascension Day festival, forty days after Easter Sunday. It's worth digging into what "taken up into heaven" might mean – but that's a pondering for Ascension. For today, it just means: "left".

It's significant because it marks the end of the "post-Resurrection appearances" of Jesus. Later people (like St Paul) might have visions of Jesus, but this is the end of him appearing to the disciples in a substantial way.

To recap, the Easter story depicts three groups – the *crowd*, representing something like the passions of the body; the *powers* (the High Priest, Pilate etc), representing (approximately) fear, anger and shame; the *disciples*, representing spiritual thoughts. You could shift the exact representations around, but for my purposes, it doesn't really matter. The three groups represent the faculties of the soul – the things the psyche can do – sense, feel, desire, reason, etc.

Jesus represents the Self, the energetic core of the psyche. The story depicts him riding past the crowd, farewelling his disciples and essentially ignoring the powers. One of his disciples (Judas) "betrays" him, he is sentenced to die and, in dying, he "betrays" (the same word in Greek, in both places, remember) his own spirit.

In this inner interpretation we have been pursuing, The Self dies and no longer appears to or for most of the psyche, except the spiritual functions, which it transforms from a group of disciples – focused inward on itself – to a group of *apostles* (literally, those who have been sent) – focused outward on the world. Then, with that work done, the Self vanishes even from the spiritual functions.

... And out the apostles go. They simultaneously organise amongst themselves a functioning movement and get out into the world to share what they know. They don't collapse. They don't vanish. They don't cease functioning.

The world of modern spirituality has a few people who talk about "losing their self". Glib sceptics are fond of asking, "well if you have no self, who's writing this book?" I think this betrays an – understandable – lack of understanding of what the self is and what losing it might mean.

The loss of self (by all accounts) is a profound transformation in the very basis of what constitutes "you" and in how you function. It's a dramatic shift, but rather than into continual navel-gazing silence, into often relentless action. A shift depicted quite vividly in this reading of the Easter story.

This transformation is not beyond your reach. It isn't something that only happens to exceptional people in ancient times. It happens to ordinary people who engage diligently in effective spiritual practice. Although the experience of it might be wrenching, the outcome isn't something to be feared. It is full, human adulthood. It is – to my understanding – "eternal life" in the words of the gospel.

I hope this series of reflections has been helpful in seeing the Easter story in a different, more personal way. I also hope that it has brought you closer to your own sense of the transformational energies present in the Easter celebration. Lastly, I hope this encourages you to lean ever more deeply into your spiritual work, to allow yourself to be transformed – as He did.

I pray upon you the wild and never-tamed energies of renewal,
of restoration, of reunion that are the great blessing of Easter.
May the Unknown Name unleash an unquenchable fire in you,
leaving you perfected in your uniqueness.
May you surrender yourself to this great transformation.
In the Name of the Three, which are One.
Amen

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