

Scriptural Reflections on Charism

Section 1

I want to tell you the story of a young man who was confronted by the experience of Charism, God's gift. This young man was very devout; very well educated in his faith; very zealous for the traditions of his religious inheritance. He was grievously offended by what he perceived as blasphemies against his faith tradition. In the manner of intensely religious young men, he was capable of watching somebody who had offended his religious sensibilities be done to death by an enraged crowd, and quite prepared to approve the action (Acts 7:54-8:1).

This young man was later subjected to an experience that was the opposite of what he approved and desired. As he set out to pursue people he regarded as blasphemers against his sacred religious tradition, he was confronted in a way he could not resist. He was confronted by Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised. Jesus spoke to this young man in a way that changed his life and the course of human religious history since.

I am of course, talking about Paul of Tarsus, a very well educated young Jewish man of the early 1st c CE. Paul's Jewish devotion included looking forward to God's gift to the world of the Jewish Messiah who would restore Israel to its proper dignity and enable the people of the world to be reconciled with God. The furthest expectation from any such Jewish person's mind was that the Messiah would endure suffering, let alone the profound shame of being executed by non-Jews, the ritually unclean Romans in the ignominy of crucifixion. That the hope of the Messiah should be hung around the neck of Jesus of Nazareth, a barely literate artisan unschooled in the law, unknown to anybody in the Jewish religious leadership, but known to have been crucified, was for Paul a blasphemy against his religious faith's most precious hopes. For the followers of this Jesus to claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was indeed the Messiah was so offensive that Paul had to take vigorous action to scotch the blasphemy before it grew any larger.

To be confronted – in whichever way it actually came about – by this Jesus himself, in a way that revealed to Paul God's own *other* vision for the world, which included God missioning

Paul himself to make God's vision known, turned Paul's life completely around. Before it showed in his outward life, Paul clearly had to rethink his entire view of what God was doing in the world. Paul had to come to terms that in Jesus, crucified and raised, God was acting definitively in the world to reconcile it to God.

To realise that you are living in a moment of theological action of this order is very sobering. To believe that regardless of any virtue or vice of your own, but entirely resting on God's decision, you are called, challenged, presented with an offer that you can't refuse, to participate in such a divine action here & now in the world, is disorienting to say the least. It is awe-inspiring; profoundly humbling; even traumatising, as you find yourself letting go of all that you held certain and sacred, all that has shaped your personality and allowing something else to re-orient your mind, your self, your purpose and energies.

Is it any wonder that there is a hidden period in Paul's life of perhaps about 10 years, when he was re-shaping his whole sense of what God was doing in the world, where the Jewish religious history and sacred writings fitted in, and growing in his relationship with Jesus, the Risen Lord to the point where Paul will say "it is no longer I who live – but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)?

Why Paul?

Because biblically speaking, he is the one who uses the term "charism." This is a Greek word, related to the word for gift, *charis carij* and of course also to eucharist, *euvcaristoj*. Strange as it may seem to us who have been hearing this word a great deal in the last 20 years or so, it was only rarely used outside the New Testament in ancient times. In the New Testament, it is Paul who uses it far more than anybody else. Of seventeen appearances in the NT, fourteen occur in Paul, the other three coming in 1 & 2 Tim and 1 Pet.ⁱ

When Paul uses this term it always relates to a gift from God for the building up of the Christian community. Paul writes about what he had experienced with his fledging

converts: that each Christian had a charism of some kind (1 Cor 7:7); that they were spiritual gifts (1 Cor 1:7), given in response to prayer (2 Cor 1:11); that there were many different kinds of charisms (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:4, 9, 28, 30) and that some were more to be sought than others (1 Cor 12:31); that the charism given by God was overwhelmingly more powerful than the force of evil that it worked against (Rom 5:15, 16; 6:23); and that along with a calling from God a charism given was irrevocable (Rom 11:29).

It is very clear from the tenor of Paul's letters that he saw a charism as a gift from God, given to an individual so that the person may enable the community to flourish in its time and place. It is a living thing that must be fostered. Paul does list off the various kinds of charisms with which God blessed the first generations of Christians to whom Paul proclaimed the Gospel.

However, I want to focus on what I believe was for Paul the chief theological driver, the dynamism out of which everything else Christian, operates. This dynamism is God's fundamental gift to the world of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from death on the cross to eternal life, life that is not held by the grave. Paul calls it a charism – in Rom 6:23, he writes, “the wages of sin is death, but the free **gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 6:23) I want to argue that in biblical terms, this is the grounding charism of all charisms: all else flows from this.

For Paul, this reality changed not merely his life, or the life of those who accepted Jesus as God's new Adam; it changed the entire cosmos, which Paul saw as longing to be set free from futility, longing for a liberation that depended on human beings being set free to be their true selves in Christ.

This, as Paul elaborates especially in Romans, has always been God's intention for the world. Paul uses two different images to convey this to his audience in Rome. He speaks of the original “Adam” of his Jewish tradition as becoming tragically captive to the seductions of **S**in, in such a way that all human beings ever after were trapped and powerless to live as they desired to do, in their best selves. For Paul, Jesus was “the new Adam,” the human race's new opportunity to live in authentic relationship with God; the great event of history

as Paul came to understand it was that Jesus actually pulled it off! Jesus lived this human life, an entire life and death in such faithfulness to God, that God raised Jesus on high in resurrection.

The second image Paul uses is of fruit growing ripe on the tree. For Paul, Jesus, the new Adam, is like the fruit of humankind becoming ripe for the first time. But as the first ripe fruit on a tree promises, the rest of the tree will soon follow suit. It is central to Paul's faith in Jesus as Risen Lord that what God brings about in Jesus in history, as the first fruits, God intends for all of us.

It is fundamentally hope in the resurrection that characterizes Christians – that capacity to trust that the God in whom we believe is one who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence that which is not.” (Rom 4:17) Paul insists to the Christians at Corinth that this is the centre of our faith, the core reality that he passes on, because “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.” (1 Cor 15:17, 19)

But for Paul this was not merely a grand theological concept. It was that – a truly grand concept, because Paul believed that in the events of Christ's death and resurrection, God had brought into this world, a first hint of the ultimate destiny God has for human beings and for all Creation. Paul believed that in some ways he, baptised into Christ, already lived resurrection life here and now. This is what he means when he writes to the Galatians,

I have been crucified with Christ;²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:19-20).

I believe that this faith is what animates true Christians and above all, religious. We can debate forever whether hospitality, peace, justice, mercy, care for the poor, care for the earth, poverty or simplicity are the central (better!!) charisms. What matters is the capacity to trust that God in God's creative act, is able, willing and loving enough to “bring life out of

death and to call into existence that which is not.” I believe that Resurrection is something that we intuit; it is not something that can be proven by empirical demonstration
Without this faith, nothing is possible in Christian Religious Life.
With this faith, everything that God desires for the life of the world is possible.

All of our founders were animated by resurrection faith; our Congregation and as they have gone on in development and as they live now, flourish to the degree that they are draw life form this charism.

Our founders and those who brought our Congregations though their development phases may not have expressed Resurrection faith by quoting the Scriptures; if they expressed it in words they will have done so in the theological or spiritual language prevalent in their day. If they did not have much access to theological education they may have had to make it up in their own words. They may well have expressed it much more by their actions.

Suggest: At tables,

1. Take some time to read the Ss quotes and the statements on Resurrection.
2. After some minutes, talk to someone nearby, with reference to your founder, founding group, or the character of your Congregation in its history, including now:
 - Some ways in which resurrection faith is evident in:
 - The **works** they undertook: to bring life where there was death
 - The **challenges** they rose to: beyond ordinary human effort or devising
 - The **way they lived, worked, related**: faith in the resurrection makes it possible to “lay down one’s life for another” even in the context of untruth, injustice, active obstruction or even persecution.

Section 2

There is no resurrection without the cross.

See 1 Cor 1:18m 22-25; 1 Cor 2:2; Gal 3:1-5; Gal 6:14-15.

Above all, see the great hymn at Phil 2:5-11.

Chat with someone:

- Where in your Congregation's life: its founding, development phase or now, has it, or does it now confront the cross, death, loss.

Quiet:

to the challenges, the suffering and pain of now, when you lead,
Christian faith in the God of Jesus who raised Jesus from the dead,
offers you a gift – a charism for now.

What is the gift, the charism, you sense God offering you?

Say it to someone.

Conclusion

Romans 16:25-27

²⁵ Now to God who is able to strengthen us
according to the gospel
and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery
that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but is now disclosed,
and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles,
according to the command of the eternal God,
to bring about the obedience of faith—
²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ,
may glory be given forever! Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ **ca, risma** occurs 17 times in the NT, all in the letters: those of Paul (6 times in Romans, 7 in 1 Corinthians, and 2 Cor 1:11), the Pastorals (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6), and 1 Pet 4:10. The Pauline references are: Rom 1: 11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29, 12:6; 1 Cor 1:7; 7:7; 12: 4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 2 Cor 1:11.