

## The Passion of Christa

25<sup>th</sup> March 2016

UNION CHAPEL

Doors 7pm. Performance 7.30pm

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This Good Friday at Union Chapel the story of the Passion is retold and reimagined through the eyes of a female Christ. It will be an evening of performance, ritual and music exploring suffering and grief from a unique perspective.

Why explore the passion narrative through the eyes of a female christ? Historically Jesus was a man, and for many the symbol of Christ is similarly male. Typically Christ is understood as God incarnate, the divine in human form. This has been problematic, as highlighted by many feminists, because it suggests that the divine is male, and hence women cannot see themselves mirrored in the face of God.

The fact that the bible and the story of Jesus was written down and interpreted in a patriarchal culture has had a huge impact on our understanding of divinity. I define patriarchy here as the idea that there is a hierarchy in the natural order of things with man, maleness, and masculinity at the pinnacle.

We are slowly moving beyond this model conceptually and culturally. As such it seems important that we continue to re-imagine the divine in ways that are relevant to our deepening understanding of what it means to be human. Nicola Slee makes the argument that if, as Teresa of Avila claims, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours", then it follows that Christ can now be found and imaged in a multiplicity of forms - black and white, male and female, gay and straight," rather than the white man commonly found in our pictures and icons.

Slee argues that there is a strong theme of the risen Christ not being recognized by the disciples, "suggesting that the forms the Christ will take are novel, strange, unrecognised, subversive, pushing the boundaries of the known and familiar." Marcella Althaus-Reid speaks of an 'obscene christ', "the black christ was obscene," Slee comments, "because it uncovered white racism in Christology, similarly, the Christa is obscene because "it undresses the masculinity of God and produces feelings and questionings which were suppressed by centuries of identificatory masculine processes with God'."

If masculinity has been equated with God and hence perfection, then that deemed feminine has been valued as less than in the hierarchy. What have we been missing out on culturally by not equating feminine traits as similarly divine?

We continue to break down the gender binary that we've inherited. It's now well known that 1 in every 2000 children are born with ambiguous genitals. To what extent our gender distinctions are a cultural construction is a vital conversation that continues as we begin to recognise the complexity and variety of human experience versus fixed concepts. And yet before we can transcend binaries and divisions it's necessary to mine the depths of everything that's been suppressed in the paradigm of binaries. To look at the aspects that have been put in the 'feminine' camp and to give them our attention. What does it mean to value what hasn't been valued?

The feminine aspect has historically been seen as cyclical and associated with the cycle of the moon. In the same way that the tides of the ocean are pulled back and forth in association with the moon, so are the bodies of women; not in a poetic or metaphorical sense but in a very real, scientific sense. For half of the month the moon ascends, for the other half it descends. Similarly the earth blossoms with spring and summer, and then it disintegrates and dies in autumn and winter.

For this reason women and the feminine aspect have often been associated with the earth, with the body, and with changeability. In patriarchal culture we have valued consistency over changeability, and this might partly be about a fear of this descent into darkness and death.

We've inherited a culture that knows very little about how to engage with this aspect of our experience. We idolise youth, we despise signs of age, we have little ritual around death, and we often haven't been given the resources to integrate our experiences of grief and loss.

There is not only the 'big death' in life, there are many deaths, many goodbyes, many transitions. How we engage with these regular deaths can begin to inform the kind of resources we might need around meeting the 'big death,' for ourselves and for those around us.

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What does it look like to value chaos, pain, darkness and the body as much as we value order, pleasure, lightness and spirit? The passion is the story of a divine figure living, suffering and dying as a human. It's a story that speaks to us because we all know what it's like to feel our mortality, and yet we still don't necessarily know how to see our divinity in it.

Re-appropriating the way we understand descent, and integrating it as part of our daily, monthly and yearly lives, is a highly creative and potent act. This is the way of descent: everything must be undone before it can be put back together reconfigured. Along the way, you might find yourself closer to the unknown that knows, closer to soul. It's a process that involves vulnerability, chaos, and ultimately, transformation.

As a woman I experience the rise and fall, the ascent and descent every month. I can choose to let everything symbolically die that needs to die when my body is physically letting go. This has become a profoundly spiritual journey and enabled me to keep creating a life of meaning and vitality. It's a continuing creative process of allowing a vision (pre-ovulation) to come to fruition (ovulation), to be critiqued (pre-menstruation) and allowed to die (menstruation). Whatever survives this cycle is taken through to the next round, to find new life. I have come to realise that death and birth are almost one and the same moment, or at least sit at either end of a short, dark tunnel.

What I am describing is a completely different model to our current ideas of progression, where planning, left-brain rationalising and control seek to enforce the outcome to which we are attached. In this model there is no sense of trust or connection to a bigger picture.

We have all had moments of darkness in our lives, where there is no hope and no sign of life. What would it be like to let ourselves fully step into the dark? When we let go of everything that no longer serves it creates a possibility of something completely new and unknown to come into being.

What if the death of Christ is one such death?

What if the female body is a Christic body?

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