

Home Retreat on 'An Easter People – All Year Round'

25 June 2022

This talk provides a reflection on Jesus' Resurrection being at the heart of the Christian faith.

The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, such as we heard at Mass during Eastertide, present us with an inspiring and encouraging example of the Christian faith lived joyfully. United by their common baptism, the first Christians were of one heart and soul, their spiritual union finding expression in common worship - the prayers they said in the Temple and the breaking of bread in their houses - and a genuine community life in which all things were held in common and none was in need; and such was their witness to Christ that they grew in number. As we read:

They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. (Acts 2: 46-47)

But it was not as though their life was without its difficulties, both internal and external: there was the problem over the distribution of food to widows, the Hellenists complaining that their widows were being overlooked, and the fraud perpetrated by Ananias and Sapphira, who claimed to have donated to the community the entire sale proceeds from a property whilst keeping some back for themselves; and then there was the hostility of the religious authorities and the beginnings of the persecution, which we see in the flogging of Peter and John, building up to the stoning of Stephen approved of by Saul. But what gave the first Christian community its strength was the believers' faith in the truth that they had been called together by God for salvation, Jesus's resurrection from the dead being

both a sign and the effective means whereby they knew the power of sin and death to have been broken; and having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who had come down upon them at Pentecost, their lives were lived consciously in the presence of God, sustained as they were by their encounter by the Word of God in Scripture and the presence among them of Christ, whom they received in the Eucharist.

These first Christians were, as Augustine was to say later of the Church, an 'Easter People': the death and resurrection of Jesus was fundamental both to their preaching and to their way of life. Like the evangelists, who wrote their gospels in the light of the resurrection, they knew what God had done for them in Jesus and chose to live out their acceptance of this gift to the full. A particular sign of the centrality of Easter to their faith was that a key criterion for the choice of a replacement for Judas was that the one chosen should have been a witness to the Resurrection; and St Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that Peter and the others preached the Resurrection - preached Jesus, himself the Resurrection and the Life - with great power and to great effect, winning converts to the Way among whose adherents there was a fundamental equality, there being for all who are in Christ no distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. Hence, Peter's vision on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa which taught him that the redeeming power of Christ made all people one, and the decision of the apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem that salvation comes through faith in the Risen Christ not by means of observing the Law of Moses.

Our prayerful meditation upon the saving truth of the Easter mystery, manifest in the lives of the first Christians, might lead us to examine quite what difference the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit have made to our lives and also how these will help us in what God is asking of us now in our life of faith as we journey towards to Him. What, for us, is the 'new kind of existence' made possible by the

Resurrection that St Paul speaks of to the Romans? Or, a little differently, what is it that the Resurrection has freed us from and how is the Holy Spirit enabling us - how do we need Him to help us - in our response to God's offer of salvation, the liberation from sin that He brought about and the opportunity to live a new life in the light and love of the Risen Lord?

As St Paul wrote to the Romans:

You have been taught that when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life....

We must realise that our former selves have been crucified with him... to free us from the slavery of sin...

When [Christ] died, he died, once for all to sin, so his life is now is life with God; and in the same way, you too must consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3-4, 6, 10-11)

Baptism, we might say then, is a paschal sacrament, being the means whereby we share in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus, this participation giving our lives an Easter orientation. It is no longer the old life of sin to which we are bound; rather, through faith and baptism we are offered new life in Christ – a life lived in the light of the Resurrection in which we learn gradually to give ourselves up to the Lord, allowing Him into all areas of our life, as we try to live with and for Him day by day.

St Benedict wrote that the life of a monk should always be Lenten in character, not because the monastic life should be simply penitential, but because he wanted his monks to live always in eager anticipation of Easter, and this because, as St Paul

taught and the first Christians found, it is Easter, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, that makes sense of our faith and so of our lives. This is why Benedict wrote that Lent is a time to 'look forward to Easter with joy and spiritual longing.' A sign of the centrality of Easter for Benedict is that the only liturgical seasons that receive particular treatment in the *Rule* are Lent and Easter, there even being a chapter on 'The Times for Saying Alleluia', with the times and frequency of meals, as well as times for fasting, depending on Easter and the Easter season.

For monks, our vows give a focus as to how we live out of baptism. We seek to listen to, and to obey, the Word of God, whom we encounter in Scripture and the sacraments; our patient stability - the wisdom of the cell, we might say - enables us to identify both those destructive thoughts that lead us away from the Lord and also what He is saying to us now; and our daily fidelity among our brothers to the demands of monastic living, by means of which we open ourselves to the Lord just as we are for His healing mercy, gradually effects within us that purity of heart that will bring us to the vision of God. But whilst lived in a particular way within the monastic enclosure, this life is no more than the Christian life, as we see in St Paul who wrote to the Colossians that 'Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand' (3:1), and who explained to the Galatians that what 'the Spirit brings is... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.' (5:22) This is what Easter – the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit – makes possible for all of us who believe.

And as believers, we recognise the truth of the Gospel that God has called us by name - even the name inscribed on the white stone - and that our part is to listen to His voice and to follow where He leads us. Fundamentally, the gift that we have been given is true and eternal life - a life with God Himself, a share in the endless and overflowing love that is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - that of which

Jesus said, 'I came that they may have life, and have it to the full' – a life lived in the here and now in anticipation of the life to come.

Suggestions for Reflection

For those who would like to reflect a little more on the relevance of Jesus' resurrection to their own lives, some texts are offered below along with some questions for reflection.

Begin with the Sign of the Cross and then say the following prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

Then read one of the passages slowly and prayerfully, allowing yourself to dwell upon any words, phrases or images that capture your attention. The questions that follow might help your reflection upon the meaning of this particular Word of God for you.

The Resurrection and the Gift of the Holy Spirit

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you', and showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'

As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.'

After saying this he breathed on them and said:

Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.

John 20:19-23

What does Jesus' resurrection mean to me?

How do I allow the Holy Spirit to influence how I live?

The Early Christian Community: An Easter People

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone.

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.

Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47

What does this passage say to me about the true nature of Christian community and how does this affect how I live with and treat others?

Jesus: the Way, the Truth and the Life

All I want to know is Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead. Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me.

Philippians 3:10-12

St Benedict taught that we should 'prefer nothing to Christ'. What does this mean for me in my life?

The Fruits of the Holy Spirit

What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. There can be no law against things like that, of course. You cannot belong to Christ unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires.

Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-25

To what extent are these 'fruits of the Spirit' present in me and how I live?