

Changed by the Resurrection

This Home Retreat reflects upon the meaning of Jesus' Resurrection for Christian life today.

St John recounts Jesus' resurrection appearance to the disciples, after he had risen and appeared to Mary Magdalene, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in this way:

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 again and said:

'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (Jn. 20:19-22)

As was the case for these first disciples, the presence of the Risen Christ among us – if only we will allow him – has the power to transform our life. Jesus, himself the Resurrection and the Life, is the source of our true life, of our identity as Christians, redeemed sinners now set free from the power of sin and death, and offered the new life of the Kingdom. We see the impact of this, and of their choice to live for God and for one another, on the first Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke describing how their acceptance of the gift of new life in the freedom of the Spirit led them to live day-by-day in a new and particular way; to live a genuinely common life of prayer and fellowship, a true communion with God and with one another with Jesus at its centre. As we read:

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 2:42-47)

And, as if to demonstrate the presence of Jesus among them as the transforming reality of their life, there are Peter's words to the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, 'I will give you what I have: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!' (Acts 3:6)

Whilst the early Christian community in Jerusalem wasn't perfect – we see the difficulties created by the unfair distribution of food to widows and the fraud perpetrated by Ananias and Sapphira – there was a recognition among these first Christians that Jesus' death and resurrection had made a real difference to them in the present reality of their life; and that this meant that they had to change. Peter and the others preached repentance, they preached the necessity of conversion, and taught and lived a discipleship in which the equality of all rested on their common baptism and faith, human dignity and human flourishing being their concern precisely because of the gift of salvation in Jesus, because all of them now lived 'in Christ'. St Paul preached the same message to the Colossians:

Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home in you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:16-17)

Is not this way of believing, and so of living, the sign of people who, in the words of St John in his First Letter, have ‘overcome the world’? They have come to know God in Christ, and animated by the Holy Spirit whom they received in baptism, they have dedicated their life to Him, because they now know it is God alone who gives fundamental meaning and purpose to their life. As we heard:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten by God; and whoever loves the Father that begot him loves the child whom he begets. We can be sure that we love God’s children if we love God himself and do what he commanded us. (1 Jn. 5:1-2)

For ourselves, we know this to be true. The various experiences of our life will most likely have led us to the knowledge that it is upon the Lord alone that we can finally depend; and that the giving of ourselves in loving service of others brings a fulfilment that we recognise as somehow helping to make us whole. But we also know that we can draw back from living in this wholehearted way as children of God; that we can become somewhat isolated in our thoughts and imaginings; and that from time to time we simply fall into sin. The difficulty seems to be that despite our faith we tend to rely on ourselves and not the Lord; and thus we hold on to habitual ways of thinking and acting which provide us with a sense of security, as they help us to make sense of our life and the world around us, but which actually limit our horizons and prevent us from living in the true freedom of the sons and daughters of God; we need to be transformed in Christ. Hence, St Paul’s advice to the Corinthians:

You must know how even a small amount of yeast is enough to leaven all the dough, so get rid of all the old yeast, and make yourselves into a completely new batch of bread, unleavened as you are meant to be. Christ, our Passover has been sacrificed; let us celebrate the feast, then, by getting rid of all of the old yeast of evil and wickedness, having only the unleavened bread of sincerity of and truth. (1 Cor. 5:6b-8)

We need to be set free from all that holds us bound to our old life of temptation and sin, and which prevents us from living as we know we should; and it is for this reason that the monastic tradition in the person of such writers as Evagrius and Cassian taught the necessity of keeping vigilance over one's thoughts, identifying those that would lead one into sin and learning with the help of God's grace how to diagnose them and how to respond with the necessary antidote. Thus Cassian wrote of anger:

Our fourth struggle is against the demon of anger. We must, with God's help, eradicate his deadly poison from the depths of our souls. So long as he dwells in our hearts and blinds the eyes of the heart with his sombre disorders, we can neither discriminate what is for our good, nor achieve spiritual knowledge, nor fulfil our good intentions, nor participate in true life; and our intellect will remain impervious to the contemplation of the true, divine light.

And in terms of the antidote:

Self-reform and peace are not achieved through the patience which others show us, but through our own long-suffering towards our neighbour. When we try to escape the struggle for long-suffering by retreating into solitude, those unhealed passions we take there with us are merely hidden, not erased: for unless our passions are first purged, solitude and withdrawal from the world not only foster them but also keep them concealed, no longer allowing us to perceive what passion it is that enslaves us. On the contrary, they impose on us an illusion of virtue and persuade us to believe that we have achieved long-suffering and humility, because there is no one present to provoke and test us....

If then we wish to receive the Lord's blessing we should restrain not only the outward expression of anger, but also angry thoughts. More beneficial than controlling our tongue in a moment of anger and refraining from angry

words is purifying our heart from rancour and not harbouring malicious thoughts against our brethren. The Gospel teaches us to cut off the roots of our sins and not merely their fruits. When we have dug the root of anger out of our heart, we will no longer act with hatred or envy. 'Whoever hates his brother is a murderer' (1 Jn. 3:15), for he kills him with the hatred in his mind.

Thus, when we detect our anger rising, rather than giving in to this powerful impulse, we need to remember our own need as sinners before God, recognising that our need is no less than that of whoever has provoked us, and in fervent prayer ask the Lord for the gift of patience that our anger may be overcome.

In general terms, we need, as the disciples did at the resurrection appearance in Jerusalem on the first day of the week, to experience Jesus in our midst, offering us his gift of peace, since having this peace in our heart is both a sign and a herald of the true life that is possible 'in Christ'. Free from rancour and bitterness, we can let go of those thoughts and impulses that cause us to act in sinful ways, the peace of God in our heart allowing us to act freely, humbly and lovingly, as taught by Jesus himself:

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.... I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another.' (Jn. 13:12-15, 34)

As with St Thomas, our sin and our failings are not an obstacle to God's love, provided that we recognise them for what they are, and in humility and love repent, offering ourselves just as we are to the Lord for his forgiveness, healing and strength, acknowledging him as 'My Lord and my God!' The gift of the

Holy Spirit should encourage us that what St John wrote at the end of his account of this resurrection appearance may be true of us:

That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name.

Suggested Reflection

Read the following passages prayerfully and consider the stimulus questions provided:

St Luke's account of a Resurrection Appearance

They were still talking about all this when [Jesus] himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!' In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, 'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have. And as he said this he showed them his hands and feet. Their joy was so great that they could still not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.

Then he told them, 'This is what I meant when I said, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in the Psalms, has to be fulfilled. He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.

‘And now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city then, until you are clothed with the power from on high.’

(Lk. 24:36-49)

What difference has the Resurrection really made to me?

Do I understand what the Scriptures teach about the Christ?

From the *Rule of St Benedict*

Second, there are the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervour of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God’s help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.

(RB 1: 3-5)

What are the thoughts (the ‘vices of body and mind’) that trouble me and can lead me into sin?

What would help me to overcome these?

St Paul’s Prayer in his Letter to the Ephesians

This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name.

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted on love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fulness of God.

Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.