

Life in the Easter Christ

This Home Retreat reflects upon the gift of true and eternal life that lies at the heart of the mystery of Easter.

‘I am the Resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever believes in me will never die.’

These words of Jesus to Martha, when he raised her brother Lazarus to life, go to the very heart of our faith, and thus to what we celebrate at Easter: the gift of new life; the possibility of eternal life with God; true blessedness. Lazarus would die again, as indeed we will all die at the end of our mortal life, but for those who have faith we know that this is a moment of change not an ending, because by dying and rising again Jesus has broken the hold of sin and death over us and has brought us into the light of God’s Kingdom.

This is the message of the great Christological hymns of St Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to the Philippians, and here to the Ephesians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all of the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons [and daughters], through Jesus Christ for his own kind purposes, to make us praise the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins.

This really is the Good News of the Gospel: that whilst we all have a spiritual journey to make, God Himself in Christ has opened the way for us, has trod the

path before us, and is there to accompany us on our way to Him, to that place where, as St Paul put it to the Colossians, our life is hidden with Christ in God.

This, of course, is not our own work. It is what God has done for us in Christ; but we do need to be ready to accept this gift and, as we do so, we find progressively just how much we really need it, as we recognise ever more clearly our frailties and our sin, this learning of our need for God, letting us see and experience just how great His love for us really is, just what it is that He has done for us in Christ.

Living like this in faith is how we walk the path of conversion, the path that it is necessary for all of us to travel, as we respond to God's invitation to share His life with Him – the life of the redeemed made possible by Jesus' resurrection.

Abbot Mauro Lepori, the Abbot General of the Cistercians, wrote the following in his Letter for Lent this year:

To grasp the positive meaning of Christian conversion to which we are all invited, it is important to understand that it is not only a transformation of our hearts, our thinking, and our behaviour. It is above all a paschal passage from ourselves to Christ, from our life to that of Christ in us. The repentant thief crucified beside Jesus did not have time to change his life, to improve it, to correct it, but asked the Saviour to take his whole person, and so his death was an Easter birth to eternal life with Him. Only by observing Jesus, hearing his word and adhering to his presence, do we truly convert, allowing the Holy Spirit to reproduce in us the living image of Jesus Christ, the beloved son of the Father.

It is this Easter life of the beloved of God that St Paul writes about to the Galatians when he says:

Now I can live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me

and who sacrificed himself for my sake. I cannot bring myself to give up God's gift.

The life which has been made possible for us, and to which we are called, is life with Christ. The Lord is always present to us; and it is by cultivating our awareness of His presence through prayer and adverting to Him throughout the day, each and every day, that we allow the God who wants to give us Himself to enter fully into our life – into every aspect of it – gradually transforming us into His image, so that we learn to love as He loves, to forgive as He forgives, to serve as He serves, and to share His life with others. This is the remarkable and exalted life to which we are all called and which is God's gift to us.

It is for this reason that St Benedict teaches us that we should prefer nothing whatever to the love of Christ; and as Pope Francis has written, 'Let us not forget this: God's mercy is for everyone, for each of us. Each person can say, "God's mercy is for me."' The Word of God, God's revelation of Himself in His Son, the Word that invites, heals, restores, saves, gives life, is addressed to all of us; and we are invited to meet Him in prayer, in the sacraments and in the Scriptures, in *lectio divina*, in the prayerful reading of, and meditation upon, the Word of God.

Pope Francis again:

The Word of God, which is addressed to all, *calls everyone to conversion*. In fact, Jesus repeats in his preaching: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. This means that God's nearness is not inconsequential, his presence does not leave things as they are, it does not advocate a quiet life. On the contrary, his Word shakes us, disturbs us, incites us to change, to conversion.... Like a sword, the Word penetrates life, enabling us to discern the feelings and thoughts of the heart, that is, making us see where the light of goodness is to be afforded room and where, instead, the thick darkness of vices and sins is to be resisted. When it enters us, the Word transforms

our hearts and minds; it changes us and leads us to direct our lives to the Lord.

This is Easter life in Christ: life in union with Jesus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who leads us along our pilgrim way to the Father. Ultimately, it depends upon the God who loves us and wants to give Himself to us; and we share, even now, in the inexpressible, eternal, mutual giving and receiving of love, which is the life of the Trinity; this is the fundamental reality of our life and it gives us our true identity. By baptism we were made sharers in Christ, members of his Body, sanctified and redeemed, called to true freedom, to a life that finds its meaning, its identity and its dignity, in Christ. As St Paul wrote to the Galatians:

The proof that you are sons [and daughters] is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries, 'Abba, Father', and it is this that makes you a son [or a daughter], you are not a slave anyone; and if God has made you son [and daughter], then he has made you heir.

The life we live now, we live in union with Christ and will find its completion in God. We meet Him in His Word, who calls us to encounter with Him, to conversion, and to true life. May we be able to say with the disciples, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?' And let us thank Him for the supreme and unsurpassable gift of Himself that makes us what we are: beloved sons and daughters of God.

Suggested Reflection

Read slowly and prayerfully the following texts, reflecting on the gift to us of Jesus and how this gift may be best accepted in my own life.

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:

His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name that is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on the earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

Because that is what he has done: he has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the kingdom of the son that he loves, and in him, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins.

He is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and everything invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers – all things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created, he existed, and he holds all things in unity. Now the Church is his body, he is its head.

As he is the Beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be first in every way; because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross.

Colossians 1:13-20

Now I can live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. I cannot bring myself to give up God's gift.

Galatians 2:19-21

One of the criminals hanging there abused him. 'Are you not the Christ?' he said. 'Save yourself and us as well.' But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus,' he said, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 'Indeed, I promise you,' he replied 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

St Luke 23:39-43

Stimulus questions

- What is the conversion to which I am called?
- What are the ways in which I need Jesus to help me in my life?
- Am I really prepared to allow him into every aspect of my life?
- Do I recognise just how great God's love for me really is?