

Easter 3

We've just heard Luke's version of what we heard from John last week: the same event through a different lens.

Matthew, Mark and Luke can easily be placed beside one another to observe parallels and differences and to help us understand what is being reported. John's version differs so much in construction and purpose from the other three that he is mostly treated separately. But in today's passage we can see some significant convergences between him and Luke.

First, there's that Easter greeting 'Peace be with you', a new phrase from Jesus, one distinctive to his *risen* discourse, one sign of the *difference* the resurrection is to make: 'peace' (Fr Julian spoke about the character of that peace last Sunday). The scene is similarly set by Luke and John: Jesus suddenly 'stood among them'. Both tell us that he showed them his wounds (Luke, 'his hands and his feet'). For John, as we heard last week, this is the story of how Thomas came to faith. For Luke it shows the material quality of the resurrection, which is rooted in the essential materiality of the incarnation, the distinctive Christian proclamation.

That down-to-earth understanding of God becoming one of us, not just pretending to be like us, transforming our humanity rather than just leaving us some beautiful rules for self-improvement, is the enactment of grace. Grace, the distinctive Christian enrichment of our relationship with God, is also to the fore in both these gospels (think of Mary, 'full of grace' in Luke; of Jesus, the Word, 'full of grace and truth' in John). 'The grace of God' is at the core of the New Testament's newness; it is a quality of God, the basis of God's loving relationship with us, barely glimpsed in the Old Testament scriptures.

Luke doesn't just want us to see the wounds; he further insists on the physicality of the risen Lord by reporting that Jesus asks for something to eat, demonstrating his humanity by performing a basic human function and fulfilling a basic human need.

The second paragraph that we heard, containing almost all of Luke's coda to his gospel, again matches but differs from John's. John, you'll recall from last week, finishes the chapter, and the original version of his book, like this:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. 20.30-31.

Luke's eye is on his up-coming sequel, Acts, and his emphasis is more hands-on. He wraps up the story, quickly recapitulating the prophecy-fulfilment aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and entrusting that message as a practical task for the listeners:

'You are *witnesses* of these things.'

For Luke, believing requires the *enactment* of experienced belief, not merely *assent* to a theory or idea. This is closer to what we know of Jesus' own teaching than John's ruminative style or Paul's theorizing about faith: you could read John and Paul as suggesting that believing the right things is sufficient to complete a faith transaction which 'saves' us. Some Christians have done that, but you can't get it from Luke. In the few remaining verses of his gospel Luke gives us a taster of his sequel, swiftly relating the ascension and the beginnings of the Church, concluding,

And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. 24.52f.

Luke's account of this resurrection meeting and the ending of his gospel emphasize that this is not a fantasy: he wants us to understand it as a piece of history to hold on to and *share*; something to which we can confidently testify, as if we are giving evidence in a court of law.

Holiness in daily life is how we are called to offer this 'witness testimony'. It is neither about access to special knowledge (Gnosticism) nor about achieving perfection by the superiority of our efforts (Pelagianism), but about living as the best people we can be in the place where we find ourselves, in what is *given* to us, in grace. As Pope Francis put in in his apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*

We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. G&E 14

Holiness is grace enacted: that which is given to us by God, simply *done*.

And, Pope Francis reminds us, God gives us the means:

When you feel the temptation to dwell on your own weakness, raise your eyes to Christ crucified and say: "Lord, I am a poor sinner, but you can work the miracle of making me a little bit better". In the Church, holy yet made up of sinners, you will find everything you need to grow towards holiness. The Lord has bestowed on the Church the gifts of scripture, the sacraments, holy places, living communities, the witness of the saints and a multifaceted beauty that proceeds from God's love, "like a bride bedecked with jewels" (*Is 61:10*).

G&E 15

The comedian Frank Skinner, a lifelong Roman Catholic, has just published a prayerbook; his late teens and early twenties were spent away from Church. In a recent interview he recounts his return to active faith:

"I am very glad I had that period [away], because I think my faith stalled at the juvenile. And if you are a believer in the modern world your faith needs to mature. You need to be able to talk to people about it in an adult way."

After estrangement, there was a spell of half-returning, as what he calls a "ghost-Catholic", sitting in the back row of the pews, not going to Communion and avoiding the priest at the door after Mass. When the two of them finally got round to talking, Skinner began by outlining his doubts caused by the gap between the traditional teaching of the Church and the Gospels.

"But the priest just cut through it all, gestured me towards him, and said, 'Come back, just come back.'

*I said, 'It's really complicated',
and he said again, 'Come back.'*

As I talked to him, he did a kind of drive-by Confession and absolved me from my sins. I didn't even know it was a Confession. The next morning I went to Mass and Communion. It was a Wednesday and there were about eight people there. None of them would have guessed that it was a monumental moment in my life."

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'Just come back'. Like Thomas did. And we have to be like the community that welcomed him. God in Jesus tells us that life is stronger than death, that his unconditional acceptance of us when we approach him brings us peace, and that he wants us to share that experience, to be witnesses of it, as people who *know* the Lord.