

Easter Day

Fr Julian said to us last Sunday that

though we are never ready for the transformation that will happen when we go down this one-way street of Holy Week, not just watching Christ, but living with His life, yet standing on the pavement chatting is not an option for us. We are to experience what Christ experienced. We are to live through it. Or rather, Christ has to live through it again in us. ... There's only one thing to say and that is Hosanna, which is a shout of praise, but is also an appeal: come and save us.

Hosanna – praise and appeal; ‘come and save us.’ And today, as the Lord opens a new horizon of glory, of life, for us, there is also only one thing to respond: ‘Alleluia! Praise the Lord.’ Praise again, praise with hope for the promised future, hope for transformation, life with the quality of eternity.

You'll often hear attributed to S Augustine the phrase ‘we are an Easter people and alleluia is our song’. When in doubt always attribute to S Augustine; he wrote so much that no one will know. Well, he didn't write this one: it was Pope John Paul II. But Augustine did write often about the Easter Alleluia. In a sermon on the psalms he says,

The season before Easter signifies the troubles of the life we live here and now, while Easter and the season following it are a foretaste and promise of the joy that will be ours in the future. **Easter points to something we do not yet possess.** This is why we keep the season before the feast with fasting and prayer; but when the fast has ended we devote these present days to praise. **This is the meaning of the Alleluia we sing.**

When Fr John Gaskell finished preaching Holy Week for me in Sydney in 1997 he said to me afterwards something I've always remembered, ‘After those liturgies one could be in no doubt that *something has happened*’; I took that as a great compliment to my servers, choir and congregation, whose devotion and participation had struck him powerfully; that's been true this year here as well.

William James, brother of Henry and author of the wonderful *Varieties of Religious Experience*, wrote that authentic religion is about *transformation*, not the institutions, dogmas and rules into which it gets routinized. He called this its ‘cash value’: the difference it makes. That is what gathers others in; that is mission.

In Holy Week, culminating last night in the Vigil and first Mass of Easter, Catholic Christians are not passive spectators. We don't just listen to an imaginative story, a diversion from real life. In our liturgies we *do* the story; Christ lives through it and lives again through us. That is the

reason for our praise – not that something we're not too clear about happened 2000 years ago, but that something happened last week, last night and is happening now as we offer this Mass together; something has *happened* and *is happening* to and through us, as Christ's body, 'once slain now ever glorious', for that body we are, as S Paul reminds us. That something is eternal life.

There are two traditions about how the disciples came to know about Jesus' resurrection: the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Christ. Today's gospel belongs to the 'empty tomb' tradition: at the urging of Mary Magdalene, honoured by Eastern Christians as the 'Apostle to the Apostles', Peter and John run to the tomb: finding it empty, but with the contents in a particular configuration, they come to at least an initial belief about the resurrection of Jesus. Then, from the appearances reported in the gospels, they, and we, begin to understand that God has not just revived Jesus' corpse in the tomb: his glorified body was reported to differ from his human body to the extent that he could be encountered in several places simultaneously; he is reported to walk through walls and vanish. Easter Sunday does not celebrate resuscitation but resurrection, which is transformation, promised to us also – 'changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place.'

The link between both resurrection traditions, 'empty tomb' and resurrection appearances, is the importance of Jesus' *death*. That is why we walk this one-way street in Holy Week; there's no short-cut. In the empty tomb accounts, like this morning's, we hear details about the grave clothes; in the appearances his wounds can be touched. He died.

However it was that the disciples came to experience the resurrection of Jesus, they knew that this was Jesus who died and was buried and that their personal encounter was with one who had been crucified.

What God did through the death and resurrection of Jesus is what Christians have done with local customs and festivals ever since: he entered it, understood it, took it on board, domesticated it and vanquished its power. That's why we believe that God empathises fully with the limitations of our human mortality and why we can trust his promise to remain faithful to us in death as he remained utterly faithful to his son Jesus Christ.

I quoted lines from two hymns earlier; the first is a hymn we rarely sing here because we don't sing offertory hymns. It is my favourite offertory

hymn riffing and expanding on the ‘pray brethren’; the full verse from which I quoted is

Within the pure oblation,
Beneath the outward sign,
By that his operation,—
The Holy Ghost divine, —
Lies hid the sacred Body,
Lies hid the precious Blood
Once slain, now ever glorious,
Of Christ our Lord and God.

That Body we are. And, as S Augustine *did* write, ‘this is the meaning of the Alleluia we sing.’ Pope John Paul’s bumper-sticker version, ‘we are an Easter people and alleluia is our song’ is good as well. We are that Body; we are all offered in the chalice: as the priest prays:

By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

The first disciples were transformed by the resurrection, and the Church was born. We too are not the same people we were a week ago; we have renewed our baptismal faith, our entering into the dying and rising of Christ. The challenge of the gospels to us is always learning *alleluia*, learning praise and hope, life-long learning to share the joy and trust, the faith, of those first disciples and allow the risen Christ to continue to transform our lives.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!