

EASTER SUNDAY MORNING, 2020

This is it. What is this “it” that this refers to? Well, “it” is simply Easter Sunday. This is it. When it comes to the faith, the liturgy, the culture of our Catholic Church it doesn’t come any better than this, than Easter Sunday, than today for today we are at the very heart, the centre, ground zero of Christian faith and life.

The liturgical year, the Church’s annual cycle of worship, contemplation, prayer and memory, can be likened to a vast geographical landscape – a great network of plains, valleys, slopes, hills, foothills, mountain ranges and peaks. That being the case, today we stand on the very highest peak of the highest mountain range of the entire landscape. We stand on Mount Easter, Mount Resurrection; we stand on the soaring peak of the rising from death to new life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Ever since the start of the current liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent on 1 December last, we have been engaged in a kind of long, extended spiritual mountain climb - up the foothills of Advent to the high peaks of Christmas and Epiphany, along the plateau of the first part of ordinary time, to the ever steepening slopes of Lent and Passiontide, then up the heights of Holy Week to the towering pinnacles of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday until at last now we stand at the very summit, the apex of the faith, prayer and life of the Church – the Supreme Solemnity of Easter Day. We are standing on our liturgical Mount Everest.

Everything else in the year of prayer and worship, all the feast and fasts, solemnities and memorials, seasons and days, all point to this one day. The feasts that occur before it point forward to it and the feasts that occur after it point back to it. To put it another way, the time that we are in right now is the holiest and the most sacred of all times. If Holy Week is the holiest week in the liturgical year and the Paschal Triduum is the holiest part of Holy Week, then Easter Day is the holiest part of the triduum. There is no time and no space more sacred for us than this time right now and this space right here.

Easter is the feast of feasts. The very first Christian community had only one annual festival – and that was Easter Sunday. Each week there was Sunday, the Lord’s Day, each one a celebration of the resurrection, and then every year there was an especially festive celebration of the resurrection. That was Easter Sunday. What Sunday was to the week, Easter Sunday was to the liturgical year. And, basically, that was it. That’s what I mean when I say, this is it.

It took several centuries of development and evolution for the rest of the liturgical year to be added in – and it did grow precisely by addition. As the Christian community entered more deeply and contemplatively into the paschal mystery and the mystery of Christ other commemorations and seasons gradually and progressively came into view one by one as times of preparation or extended contemplation – Good Friday, Holy Thursday, Palm Sunday, Lent, Christmas, Advent – looking forward to Easter – and then Low Sunday, Ascension Thursday, Pentecost, Trinity, Corpus Christi, Christ the King looking back to Easter. The solemnity of Christmas, for example, was not known before the fourth century. The modern liturgical year is a complex of concentric circles all surrounding Easter.

Every sermon preached by every Christian apostle, evangelist and missionary in the New Testament literature focuses on the resurrection. In the first reading at Mass this morning we heard one of the very first of such sermons preached by the Apostle Peter in the town of Caesarea Philippi, recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles, ‘...I can witness to the fact that they killed Jesus of Nazareth by hanging him on a tree, yet three days afterwards God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people but only by certain witnesses God has chosen beforehand.’

One of the most disruptive disputes that shook the early Church was an argument precisely about the proper date for the celebration of Easter. It took place in the second century and almost –

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but not quite – tore Church in two. The first Christians took their Easter festival very seriously because for them it was everything.

And this ritual centering mirrors a kind of centering in reality, in the economy of grace. The resurrection of our beloved Lord and Master is the turning point of all time and space, it is the great pivot of the entire progress of history and the sweep of the cosmos. It was for the sake of the resurrection of the sacred humanity of his Son in time and space that God created the universe of time and space in the first place.

Whatever imperfections our liturgy this morning might have, and as something human it has a few, it still reminds us that this is the holiest of days because it tells so much about how God, the All Holy One, is holy – about his goodness, his kindness, his mercy, his justice and his power. This is also the holiest of days because it tells much about the meaning of human holiness. To be holy is not primarily about performing religious exercises, important though are, or maintaining a pious demeanour but about living a truly authentic human life.

If we want to see what authentic humanity looks we have only to gaze on the brilliant, shining, splendid, beautiful body of the risen Christ – this is the visible sign, the sacrament, of what it means for any man or woman to be truly holy. To be holy means to be perfect in our human nature just as our heavenly Father is perfect in his divine nature. That is the exhortation that we have received from Christ – be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Christ reveals both human perfection and divine perfection. To be holy, to be authentically human, means to be like Jesus – to have his mind and to act as he acted. His resurrection is a kind of mirror which shows us how God the creator designed human nature to be at the beginning and as it will be at the end, at the consummation of the ages.

The resurrection, central and supreme though it is, cannot be disconnected from the rest of the paschal mystery, the suffering and dying of the Lord. After all, there can be no resurrection without a death. Given all that has been said about the resurrection, why is the cross – the sign of death - the outstanding symbol of the Christian religion? The resurrection is God's vindication of all that Jesus had done and taught. It is precisely in his life of obedience to the will of the Father and of service to the human family that the crucified and risen Jesus displays what true human life looks like. The resurrection above all constitutes the confirmation of all Christ's works, teachings and claims, to be Messiah, Lord, King, Saviour and God. The resurrection is God's seal of approval on this way of being human. Christ's act of obedience to his Father, accepting death, even death on a cross, nullifies the disobedience of Adam and secures the redemption of the human race according to the divine plan. In St John's gospel, whose account of the passion we heard yesterday and the beginning of whose account of the resurrection we heard this morning, the death of Jesus is his glorification. His radical obedience makes them the same thing. For St John, Christ rules as king, reigning in glory from the cross as his throne, wearing thorns as a crown and clothed in blood as vestments. The resurrection then is the Father's approval, the acceptance and the confirmation of what the Son has just done. Jesus once taught that he who exalts himself shall be humbled and he who humbles himself shall be exalted. As the perfect preacher, he never asks his listeners to do something which he is not willing to do.

The Lord also once said that the only way in which we can be his disciple is to take up our daily cross and follow him. The cross is fundamental to the Christian vocation. At the same time, the message of today's feast is the good news, the gospel, that the cross is our reconciliation and our road map through life but it is not our ultimate destination. Our goal, our destiny is to share in Christ's glorious new life, beginning here in this life and coming to its spectacular completion in the next. Christ's resurrection is the principal cause and source of our own hoped-for resurrection. The cross is the means to our end, our destiny in glory.

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At about the same time that the row about the date of Easter was raging in the second century, to which I referred earlier, there lived on the other side of the Christian world in Gaul, modern France, one of the Fathers of the Church, St Irenaeus of Lyons. He famously wrote, 'The glory of God is man fully alive.' The risen Christ is the paradigm, the default setting, of that principle. The glory of God is found most perfectly in the risen humanity of Jesus. As followers of the risen one, may we strive to be fully alive in him so that we, too, might be the glory of God.

– Christopher Dowd, O.P.
St Dominic's Priory
12 April, 2020
in time of epidemic