

Easter Night

All readings ending with the Resurrection Gospel Luke 24:1-12

16.04.2022

The readings of our Easter Vigil began with the wonderful story of creation taken from the Book of Genesis. All began with emptiness and darkness. Everything was a formless void. To quote a poetic expression of Fran Ferder: It was a world without welcome, an earth that held no warmth.

Given the quasi-hostile environment from which created order emerged, the Genesis account can be read and understood in terms of a mystery of redemption. By the creative power of God's word there was deliverance from darkness and an end brought to confusion. With the emergence of light and the implementation of necessary separations, the good ordering of all things was established. Liberation from chaos took place.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI speaks of both God's creative work begun in Genesis and His salvific work accomplished with the resurrection of Christ as equally transformative acts. He sees the resurrection of Jesus as having been prophesied in the Genesis story – not least in the passage from darkness to light which is at the heart of both events. For Pope Benedict the resurrection of Jesus is the crowning God's creative work begun in Genesis. He talks of the resurrection of Jesus causing a new creation to be born in the midst of the old, transforming chaos into cosmos.

If we listened to tonight's first reading attentively we will have noticed how the story of creation was punctuated by the Lord's proclamation of the goodness of all that He had made. It is as if the Lord is depicted as standing back at each step along the way of His great work of creation to contemplate with amazement what His creative word accomplished. The Creator God is said to have marvelled at and rejoiced in the work of His hands. The following refrain is echoed throughout the story: Behold what I have made is good. The story reaches its climax with the creation of humanity. At this point the Lord exults with exuberant joy, declaring: Behold what I have made is not just good; it is indeed very good!

If our long Liturgy of the Word tonight began with the Genesis story, it ended with the proclamation of the resurrection taken from Luke's Good News account.

In this final text, the Resurrection story read tonight, we find some of the same elements found in the Genesis account with which we began. There is the emptiness and darkness of the tomb, for example, and there is a strong element of confusion too, we could say... for, we are told that those who came to the tomb, and found it empty, were left wondering: What has happened? Where is the body that was laid in the tomb? And yet, at the same time, there is also something of the sense of wonder and amazement we remarked upon in the first creation story. The text of tonight's Resurrection Gospel ends with the note that Peter went home from the empty tomb amazed at what had happened.

It struck me that I might ask the following questions on this Easter Night: What about us? Where do we stand within ourselves tonight? How do we feel deep down within, as we listen to God's word and contemplate the great Easter event?

I suspect that some of us who are gathered here tonight may find ourselves caught in places of emptiness and darkness at this particular moment in our lives. Maybe others among us are feeling somewhat lost and confused, finding it hard to understand life's meaning and even God's ways.

If this is how we feel inside, are we going to allow ourselves to get stuck therein? Surely we are called to move beyond such dead-ends.

In light of God's call to move forward, we might ask ourselves: What about the elements of marvel and amazement found in the Genesis story and in Luke's Resurrection account? Are they also part of our experience?

Having heard in the texts of Sacred Scripture read tonight so many of the great things God accomplished in humanity's favour throughout the ages, I hear an invitation addressed to us to allow ourselves to be amazed as Peter was. What our celebration of the Liturgy of this Holy Night should bring about within our hearts is a sense of marvel as we contemplate the great gift of God's goodness revealed in His creative and redemptive love.

The Exsultet intoned as we entered into this building tonight gave expression to the Church's sense of wonder and awe in its evocation of the many marvellous deeds God worked in favour of His people over the ages... and, along with these, the wonderful things the Lord still works in our favour in this day and age. The Exsultet hails for us what the hymn-writer calls: Love so amazing, so divine.

It seems to me that if we have lived the past Holy Days and this Most Splendid Night as we are meant to, then we will carry back to our homes tonight the same sense of interior amazement Peter carried back to his house after his halt at the empty tomb.

Inspired by tonight's Gospel I feel led to tease out with you the notion of amazement found therein!

We might ask: Just what is amazement? While some might equate amazement with admiration, I see it as more than that. It is inclined to equate it more with adoration than admiration.

Amazement is more than simply the admiration of beautiful things and wonderful people.

We can admire something or someone and not be changed by our admiration of them. When we admire something or someone that thing or that person will remain exterior to us. We are not necessarily changed by what we admire.

While we can talk about what we admire, what amazes us leaves us speechless. It draws us beyond what we are capable of expressing and encapsulating in words. Amazement leads us into adoration of a mystery which surpasses us.

It seems to me fair to say that amazed people are visibly changed people.

Amazement is a transformative experience. Put simply, what amazes us changes us; it transforms us.

Speaking on Palm Sunday 2020, in his Angelus address, in the year Covid-19 first erupted – a time which left so many people closed in upon themselves, isolated, living in lockdown mode, Pope Francis spoke of how we are called as disciples of Jesus to live our faith outside narrow spaces. He went on to say: To admire Jesus is not enough. We have to follow in His footsteps, to let ourselves be challenged by Him; to pass from admiration to amazement.

(I found it striking to hear Pope Francis, the Successor and Vicar of Peter, emphasise so strongly in that address – especially at that time when St Peter's Square was empty – the notion of amazement which Luke's Resurrection Gospel account associates so strongly with the Apostle whose mission the Bishop of Rome fulfils in the Church today.)

If the Easter Gospel reading heard tonight reaches its climax with Peter's amazement, the Easter story does not end there. It continues. The Easter event (which is more than just the

story) is meant to be made manifest in our lives in the here and now of our existence. The Easter event is meant to be witnessed in the transformation the resurrection of Jesus brings about within you and me... within us.

How important it was for the Apostle Peter to be brought to the point of amazement! How important it is for us to be brought to that same point!

In the few days hitherto Peter having been told of, and going to see for himself, the empty tomb, this apostle had lost heart. The hopes Peter had pinned on Jesus had been disappointed. They were altogether dashed. Discouragement – a word Luke is not afraid to use for Jesus' disciples (think of what he tells us about the two on the road to Emmaus) – had surely set into Peter's mindset and overshadowed his heart. Overcome with fear – and we can suppose gripped by doubt as well – Peter had arrived at such a low ebb during Jesus' trial that he denied ever having known or been associated with Him. Indeed, such was Peter's sense of loss, we can imagine him saying to himself that, he had never known the Master. When the frightened apostle declared to the servant girl that he did not know Jesus it could be that Peter was actually saying to himself that this was true: that while he had thought he had known Jesus, he must not really have known Him at all. He was so disappointed.

But at the point where we meet Peter tonight, standing at the empty tomb, after Christ's resurrection from the dead – albeit still not quite able to fathom the mystery of Jesus's having risen from the dead, this weakened man seems to have allowed amazement to fill his whole being. To fill the void!

We can take it that, seized by amazement, new life, fresh vigour, and restored hope were accorded to Peter – at least in germ.

Having seen for himself that Jesus' body had gone, Peter must have started to believe what the women had shared with him and the rest of the Eleven. While still probably not able to fully comprehend what had happened, at least he must have begun to let what he witnessed before his every own eyes sink in.

We can take it that as Peter stood there looking into the darkness and emptiness of the tomb, he dared to believe that from this cold and unwelcome space of loss, something far beyond all telling – Love far beyond all telling – had come forth.

Standing there, Peter will have recognised Christ's light to have emerged from the darkness. The apostle will have felt the Master's mysterious new mode of presence now filling the air. We can take it that Peter will have experienced something akin to a strange warmth in the very depths of his being. Peace (Christ's own peace) will have pulsed in Peter's veins. What Peter must have felt as he stood at the empty tomb was simply love: Christ's love in death! A love which he now recognised to have brought forth new life and a new birth within him!

The great mystery of Easter is revealed to all of us in the gift of life experienced even as we grapple with the losses caused by death; in the grace of hope offered at times and in places of despair. In our lives, it is in the stark aridity of our sometimes barren existence that the resurrection wells up like a fresh surge of water in a spring which had run dry. We might hold on to the images I have just employed as we enter into that part of the Sacred Liturgy in which we recall our Baptism in a few moments.

While the resurrection can hard for us get our minds around, its power is revealed to us in all the dead-end situations of our lives (and the lives of those around us)... the dead-end situations that open up to a new way forward and which had been previously unimaginable.

At this time in history – a time when our world is held in the grips of war through the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the resurrection of Jesus is made visible in and through all those who dare to love defiantly in places of hatred. The lesson of Easter is that Christ's resurrection is God's creative response to death! (We give thanks for those who respond creatively at this time in the drama being lived in our world by welcoming refugees.)

In the heart of the greatest trials and deepest darkness we are led to traverse in life God's creative work and resurrection power is available to us... if only we dare to open our hearts to welcome the gift.

Of course, it is not only in hours of great difficulty, but each and every day these gifts are available to us. The dawn of every new day is a creation and a resurrection experience for those who have faith in God.

Let me draw this Christian meditation to a close with a quotation from the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel. He makes this very point. His words are, I believe, a Christian prophecy. He writes: Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... It should be to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. The rabbi concludes: To be spiritual is to be amazed.

May we become spiritual men and women – men and women as spiritual as the very earthy apostle Peter when he stood at that empty tomb, completely mind-blown by what he had heard from the holy women and was given to witness for himself: Christ is not here!

May we go to find Christ where He awaits us – in our homes; in all those places where He awaits us; in all those places where we awaken to life each and every day.

Amen!