

SHOWING FORTH THE LORD'S RESURRECTION

It is natural that during Holy Week our focus should be on the Holy One, on our Lord as he enters Jerusalem in what we loosely call triumph, as he teaches in the temple and throws the money-changers out, as he sups with his disciples one last time, as he prays in the garden, as he endures his great passion, and, on this glorious day, as he rises from the dead. The disciples on the whole play either a functional role, as in securing the ass for him to ride upon or preparing the Upper Room, or a dysfunctional one, by failing to stay awake with him during his agonizing prayer, by their incomprehension and resistance to his washing their feet, by their wielding a sword when the soldiers come to arrest him, by their utter cowardice when the crisis comes, and they end the week hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. The women, it must be said, did far better—as is usually the case (!): Mary of Bethany anointing his feet with nard, his blessed Mother with two other Mary's standing by the cross, the three who went boldly to the tomb early on the third day to bring burial spices, while the disciples were still secreted away somewhere. But through the dramatic unfolding of the events of the week against a backdrop of sordid characters whose names live on in infamy, Judas, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, Herod, the soldiers, the fickle crowd, . . . Though it all our focus is naturally upon our Lord, on his acclamation that Sunday, on his devotion that Thursday, on his suffering, death, and burial that Friday, and—praise be to God—on his resurrection as it were today. St. Paul boils this week, and indeed the whole gospel, down to its essence when he writes at the beginning of I Corinthians 15, “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (vv. 3-4).

So, of course, it is altogether natural and proper that the focus of Holy Week should be upon the Holy One, but we need to add to that and say that our focus should be on Jesus Christ crucified and risen *in such a way* as to understand that we are crucified and risen in him. It was with a deep understanding of this that the Church traditionally baptized its catechumens, often after three years of catechesis, on Easter day, and that early in the morning before the sun was

up, taking them to an adjacent baptistry, where first they faced toward the west, the land of darkness, spat out their contempt and repudiated the devil and all his pomp. Then turning away from their sinful past to the east, land of the rising sun, they confessed their faith in the three-fold form of the Apostles' Creed. Thereafter they removed their old clothes, were submerged in the waters of baptism, being cut off from the world, symbolically and spiritually buried with Christ, and then were raised up out of the waters of death, cleansed of all filth, and clothed in the white garments of righteousness, just as the sun began to rise above the horizon. It was a new day, and they were new creatures, a new creation. The sinful past was finished and gone, washed away, buried in the waters, and a new life was given, the very life of the risen Christ and the presence and power of his Holy Spirit.

It was not Christ alone who died and rose. We, who were baptized in his name, died and rose in him. And although we know that the story of Holy Week unfolded long ago and at a fixed point in history under Pontius Pilate, it is more than an event in history. It is an event that lies at the very heart of all history and embraces all times. It reached back in history to the distant past. St. Peter tells us that after his death our Lord preached to the spirits in prison (I Pet. 3:18-19). The meaning of this verse is shrouded in mystery but there is a wonderful sermon for Holy Saturday preached by some unknown ancient Church Father. He wrote (on Holy Saturday, remember),

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives, Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: "My Lord be with you all." Christ answered him, "And with your spirit." He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendents I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I

am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.¹

Our Lord's death reached back to the very beginning, which is why in the altarpiece before us the skull of Adam is found underthnea the cross.

In a similar way the death of our Lord reached forward in history to embrace us as well, who are baptized into his name. The Lord has also said to us in our sin, "Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you." Thus did St. Paul write in today's Epistle that we are risen in Christ. We, in our old nature, are dead, having died in him to sin, and our life is now hid with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then will we also appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4). We are in Christ. We form one person with him, who are his body, the body of him who is our head. J.B. Lightfoot summed up the apostle's argument thusly: "When you sank under the baptismal water, you disappeared for ever to the world. You rose again, it is true, but you rose only to God. The world henceforth knows nothing of your new life, and (as a consequence) your new life must know nothing of the world."² This new life, this resurrection life, is a spiritual reality for those who are in Christ Jesus. We celebrate this day not only our Lord's resurrection, but ours in him.

This is a spiritual *reality* for the believer, as I said, but it is also a spiritual *challenge*. It is a life that has been implanted in us but it is not yet finished. It is a work as yet incomplete. St. Paul cites this reality of our resurrection life in order to call us to live out its truth. "If ye then be risen with Christ [or, *since* you are risen with Christ], seek those things that are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). The words are familiar, for we hear them at least every Easter, but I think that their force escapes us. St. Paul urges us to remember the risen Christ exalted at God's right hand. "Where Christ sits at the right hand of God" is an allusion to Psalm 110, verse 1, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." That verse was quoted by St. Peter on the day of Pentecost in the very first apostolic sermon as a lead in to the statement with which he clenched his remarks, "God hath made this same Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). It is not

¹ *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. II, pp. 496-497.

² *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Revised Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 209.

surprising that that verse from Psalm 110 is the most quoted text from the Old Testament on the pages of the New, for it gets at the very heart of our redemption. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has gained the victory over death and hell. Though not apparent to those who know him not, he is the ultimate Lord of all things. The story of Holy Week is not a sad story of a grave injustice done to a beloved innocent, but of the confrontation of the eternal Word of God made flesh battling in our human nature all of the forces of sin, evil and corruption that have oppressed and imprisoned us since the beginning of time; oppressed and imprisoned us, to be sure, because we have succumbed to them. John Henry Newman wrote in that beloved hymn,

O loving wisdom of our God!
 When all was sin and shame,
 A second Adam to the fight
 And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
 Which did in Adam fail,
 Should strive afresh against the foe,
 Should strive and should prevail.

And that a higher gift than grace
 Should flesh and blood refine:
 God's presence and his very self,
 And essence all divine.

O generous love! that he who smote
 In Man for man the foe,
 The double agony in Man
 For man should undergo;

And in the garden secretly,
 And on the cross on high,
 Should teach his brethren, and inspire
 To suffer and to die.

We should not wonder that our Lord should pray in agony in the garden, sweating as it were great drops of blood, for the contest that lies at the very heart of human history was at hand, the ultimate battle of good and evil, of God and his ancient serpentine adversary. But it was fought and won, and Christ the Victor sat down at the right hand of God and waits for all his enemies to become his footstool.

The Christian, and he alone, knows this. He knows by faith the ultimate outcome of history, that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. That which is by no means apparent to the eye of unbelief is known to the eye of faith. So St. Paul argues that since the Christian knows that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father, he is to seek those things that are above, that is, those things that are of God and of his Christ. James Dunn is right when he notes that “seeking those things that are above” does not mean that the Christian is “preoccupied with the furniture of heaven.”³ To seek those things that are above is to know that Christ is the ultimate victor, that his truth is the ultimate truth, and that his way is the true way. Dead to sin and alive to Christ, the Christian is to shun evil and adorn himself with virtue. Our text at the beginning Colossians 3 is followed by the injunction to “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: [namely] fornication, impurity, etc.” St. Paul is telling us that the glorious victory of Christ we celebrate this day should be for us the strongest incentive and the most powerful enabler to live lives of love and service, of holiness and truth. Adam Smith wrote 250 years ago in his great book, *The Wealth of Nations*, “To restrain our selfish [affections], and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature.” That is very well put, but it is not possible apart from the love and grace of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, at work in us. May we, in every task we find at hand, in every problem we confront, in every relationship we enjoy, ever remember the victory of our Lord that we celebrate this day and show forth the glory of his resurrection in all that we are and do.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010. Copyright © 2010.

³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 205.