

Easter Sunday (C) 2019

Boarbank Hall

He saw and he believed (Jn 20:8)

Today is the foundational feast in the Christian calendar. Easter determines what Christians should be. What this means in practice is beautifully set out in *The Epistle to Diognetus*, (Nn. 5-6; Funk, 397-401, second century AD): "Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred. To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world."

Witness

Now looking back how did those who were suffering understand demands of Christianity? This is treated in a major way by St. Athanasius- the Patriarch of Alexandria, in his book *De Incarnatione - The Incarnation* (Chapter V in English). He speaks of the witness that martyrdom bears to the reality of the resurrection. He takes it as normal and natural that all healthy human beings want to go on living. They should live and flourish, putting off death until it is naturally inevitable. But, Athanasius says, speaking from lived experience then, in the time of persecution for the faith, young children and poor women, and strong and weak men, all preferred to die rather than to deny their faith. They believed in the resurrection- in the fact that Jesus, God's Son, was raised from the dead. And that they would be safe with him after their own imminent death. This belief for them was a reality. It changed their perspective on everything. Indeed it was totally remarkable, for previously such people had been living in a pagan world and believing in pagan gods- as in St. Augustine's Hippo. For Athanasius this was a powerful expression of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.

Thinking in this way the resurrection is a new life, being lived out already in this world. It relativises all ordinary things. Helping people willingly to accept death it alters all perspectives on life in the world. In the days of Athanasius in Fourth Century Egypt, precisely in February 303, a terrible persecution began under Diocletian, and as a young boy Athanasius was in the thick of it. Aged fifteen he had thought he was going to be killed. Having survived he knew what he was talking about.

The Feast of Easter

Centuries later, a man who admired St. Athanasius greatly, John Henry Newman wrote a sermon one Easter Sunday: "But we, who trust that so far we are doing God's will, inasmuch as we are keeping those ordinances and rules which His Son has left us, we may humbly rejoice in this day, with a joy the world cannot take away, any more than it can understand. Truly, in this time of rebuke and blasphemy, we cannot but be sober and subdued in our rejoicing; yet our peace and joy may be deeper and fuller even for that very seriousness. For nothing can harm those who bear Christ within them...We have his own history to show us how Christ within us is stronger than the world around us. We have the history of all his fellow-sufferers, of all the Confessors and Martyrs of early times and since...that faith and love have a real abiding place on earth...that Martyrs and Saints will start forth again, as plentiful as though they had never been before.." (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Ignatius Press, 1995, 322-3). He wrote that when anticipating what is now our daily experience, massive secularisation.

Conclusion

How are we helped now to keep faith in the resurrection? It is a glorious springtime where we are. Without faith we may not see that mysteriously nature is 'creation in all its beauty', intrinsically associated with resurrection and renewal. All beauty is a manifestation of the mysterious presence of God with us. To live the transformed life that resurrection implies means transmitting these values, pursuing truth and beauty, in a life of love and affection and selfless generosity, with fidelity and respect. Sharing these values brings peace and reconciliation. It is another name for redemption. A happy feast to you all. Amen.

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