

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Easter

Last week we talked about the meaning of the Cross. St Paul was very keen to say that the Cross is the chief reason for his faith and hope; but he also said *If Christ be not risen from the dead, our preaching is useless and your believing it is useless!*

One temptation is that we skip over the *unpleasant* details of the Cross, and try to go straight for the springtime imagery of Easter. If we do, we shall end up with a trivial faith, and that will give us a trivial life - unless God is good enough to drag us back to the mystery of the Cross (and my experience is that he *is* good enough, and that no-one can long avoid the way of suffering, the only way by which we can be saved).

This means that there is no Easter joy that does not need the gravity and grandeur of the Cross. The Cross is, if you like, the material from which Easter is made; *the risen Christ shows us his hands and his side*: he will never lose the wounds by which he reconciled us to God. We should not think that his death is relegated to the past; rather it is glorified in eternity. So with our sufferings, griefs, and sorrows: they are not banished, like the disastrous wounds inflicted on Jerry Mouse by Tom the Cat, at a stroke of the artist's pen. They are our personal share in Calvary, where we shall meet the grace of God most personally.

Perhaps there are Catholics whose distaste for human sorrow keep them on the sunny side of the street. They come for Christmas carols and figgy pudding, and they come for an Easter that is lambs and chocolate and daffodils. But Good Friday sees them in the shops or visiting friends; and the night of the Lord's Supper is only for people with a special interest in religion. I think most priests would say that these seasonal visitors to the Church are the hardest people to reach; they think they have tailored a religion to their real needs, but in truth they have short-circuited its power with devastating thoroughness. A total stranger would be easier to evangelise. No wonder they see so little of what the Eucharist means, and find it easy to miss Mass for the rest of the year!

A Great Divide There is a crossing-over in the Easter story which we do well to bear in mind. Jesus crosses from earthly life to eternal life when he breathes his last, and delivers the Spirit to his Father. This return to the Father is a real transition. So although his body continues to have an *earthly* history (pierced by the lance, taken down from the Cross, buried in the tomb) Jesus himself is liberated from the limitations of space and time. Thus the Scripture has him passing into locked rooms (and out of them). From this point on, he shares in the life he had with the Father before the Creation came to be.

We dramatise the truths which follow from this in a temporal cycle, which we call Eastertide: for forty days we remember the encounter of the disciples with the risen

Christ; then we contemplate his return to the Father as if it were a spatial journey (the Ascension); finally we celebrate the sharing of the Holy Spirit which flows from the Father's receiving of Jesus' Good Friday gift (*he breathed forth the Spirit*) in the solemnity of Pentecost. All of that takes us fifty days; but because Jesus leaves the world of space and time at his death, you could just as easily tell it all in a single sequence; and this is what Luke does in his Gospel (where Jesus ascends to the Father on Easter Night) as John does in his (where Jesus is seen delivering the Holy Spirit in the midst of the Eleven on Easter Night). Luke then tells it again in the Church's way - in a fifty-day sequence - in the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*.

In fact, what Jesus does in his Passion and Death reflects what he does in eternity, and what the Father does for Jesus in eternity is extended to the Church in the mystery of Pentecost.

In this way the power of eternal mysteries comes to earth and is experienced by us in time. God does not change; but we who accede to his mysteries do change.

Jesus could "progress" to the Father during his human lifespan, struggling, questioning, praying, even being tempted; but once his earthly life has been poured out, he resumes his eternal equality with the Father, and all earthly limitations are at an end for him.

So when we are wondering at the mysterious content of the Easter mystery, we are trying to look beyond the divide: from earth to heaven, from time to eternity, from human to divine. There are so many ways in which we can't express these things properly; when we try, often we produce a caricature that is easy to shoot down. The Scriptures themselves can only use images and shadows to express divine mysteries. Even while the Bible gives us a God who descends on a mountain-top with clouds and thunder (which is an earthly image) it is also telling us that the first commandment is never to trust any earthly image of God! If we look at the very end of the four Gospels you will see that they all eschew any crass description of the Ascension (a scene which comes to the brink of the Great Divide); but the *Acts of the Apostles* attempts it, mercifully interposing a chaste cloud to bring the scene to a close.

Today more than ever we need to discuss these things, and the way in which the truth of the Resurrection is to be understood. As British people lose the well-trained sense they used to have of the Christian destiny of human life and the reality of the heavenly realm, they find a faith in life after death increasingly questionable, and need to ask themselves how they can believe in it. We live within a hyper-rational and very materialistic culture, which is content (at least when it is prospering) with a world that rewards us with consolation and comfort, but ends in extinction. This may be a crude and generalised statement, but it tells a truth about our times. Russian Communism tried to establish that kind of materialism, and it is widely agreed that it was a very bad thing for most of the people who endured it. The human spirit was compressed to the point where few could tell it from a bottle of vodka; male life expectancy in Russia today is in the late 50's. When we proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus, and call on people to put their faith in him for eternal life, it is really important that we don't present them with what sound like children's fairy-stories. The most important element in establishing this realism is the Cross itself, because the Cross is universal, and easily identified by all of us. It is the community that carries the Cross with Christ that can receive, and convincingly proclaim, the Gospel of the Resurrection.

The RCIA Course meets on Monday in the Church Hall, from 7 to 8 30 pm.