

Easter Night

This is the night, says the Exultet over and over. The way we celebrate this night is vital - to do with life and death. I think of three conditions for true joy in this night; they are awesome, but also humble; and I hope we may find we are not altogether lacking in them. I shall give you three figures to think of.

Easter is our spring, and its joy belongs to what is new-born. My first figure is therefore a baby. He is new, and young, and fresh, awakening peacefully to the greatness into which he has been born. To share the joy of Easter, we need, first of all, to be *baptised*. Those resonant phrases from the Exultet, speaking of the victory of God, only spell joy to Israelites, not to Egyptians; our Easter joy lies on the far side of the water of Baptism - the shore which Egyptians never reach. Thus our first need is sacramental - to be members of the new Israel. Become like the baby, and joy will be yours.

Secondly, I would take you to the Cathedral of Florence, and show you the figure of a woman who stands near the font. She is emaciated, and seems to be wearing a rough skin which is all tatters. Her eyes seem at once widened unnaturally, and at the same time blinded with light. It is the woman who in all the Gospels is first at the tomb of Jesus, the first true Evangelist: Mary of Magdala. As only poor Christians, we need to have taken up the role of penitent to which the Lenten church has called us. Our willingness to die to sin needs a personal commitment, a personal setting-out on pilgrimage, a leaving-aside the bread of the world to search for the bread of God, the food of eternity. So to share Easter joy we need that salt of the spirit, which is repentance; the self-satisfied are impeded from joy. All who would celebrate this feast need to come hungry. So imitate Mary, who came to weep, but departed with the seeds of Easter.

My third figure has been with us throughout the last three days. I would take you to the Hague, to the Maritshuis, and you will see him there in Rogier van der Weyden's great *Deposition*: Peter, with his face ravaged and streaked with an indelible grief: he will never forget how *he went out and wept bitterly*; but this was no temporary sorrow. The third quality we need refuses to be defined in easy general terms, and we will all have to discern it for ourselves: what I mean is, that we have to know in some personal way that *we are dead*, that death has laid its hand on us and marked us. I find it difficult to define how it comes to us, but I know that it is linked with what the theologians call *original sin*, and that it is engrained deep in our nature. So I believe we all have it. People only vary in their knowledge of it: some know it clearly, when they have a deep experience of some evil, as victims of sickness or sin, as bereaved, defeated, or radically disappointed, as people who know they have themselves sinned, or who have caused great suffering for others. Some seem to have this knowledge only through the experience of others, but still share in it by their compassion. And some seem to have avoided all knowledge of it, or have refused to admit it, believing it too grievous to be taken into account. This is knowledge of death.

I believe this knowledge to be a condition for our receiving of the joy of Easter; but it is a mystery to me at the same time; I find it hard to wish such knowledge to come to anyone; and yet it is this that makes the church able to call the fall of humanity from grace *a happy fault, a truly necessary sin*.

It is this last condition for Easter joy that we most need to fulfil, and to bring forward as our offering to the Saviour. As human beings, we may feel such knowledge, such feelings

disqualify us from community, or dishonour our record. As Christians we know differently. as Jesus' disciples, we know that the kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit, and to celebrate Easter is to receive that fact as good news. Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. In the Gospel of Mark, we are told that the disciples of Jesus had all fled the Passion in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus suffered entirely alone. The people closest to him all failed when they were "put to the test". We may feel inclined to thank God that we were not of their number; perhaps these women, who "stood afar off" at the Crucifixion, may have thought the same. Yet they are brought to the same moment as the Twelve on Easter morning, when they arrive at the tomb and are confronted by the angel, who orders them to go and proclaim the Resurrection. The Gospel tells us that "they said nothing to anyone, because they were frightened out of their wits". It is clearly possible for us all to fail in our turn, when we are put to the test. No doubt many an early Christian was well-inclined towards Jesus, but faltered at the mention of the Cross; Mark is insisting that all who are called Christians must be unafraid to bear witness to the one who was *crucified*.

For this, it is necessary for all of us to have found, and shouldered, the Cross in our own lives, so that we truly know *our* need for the Resurrection. Then we shall be ready to hear the good news of this night: if in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his rising. Or, in the words of the Gospel, we must enter the tomb ourselves:

*See the place where he lay! then go quickly and tell his disciples:
He has risen from the dead. Alleluia!*