

Easter Vigil 2007

To try to explain the Christian faith, it isn't enough to learn about the first century AD. You have to begin much earlier: with the first stirring of faith in a man called Abraham, who may have lived seventeen centuries before Christ. Later thinkers pushed the beginning back to the first stirrings of the created Universe.

To try to explain a single Christian's life, you have to make a similar journey back. The meaning is a shared one, uniting Jews and Christians, each of whom reflects differently the light of a single faith.

In our Masses this year we're listening to the Gospel of Luke. He has a classic description of making Christians. Two pupils of Jesus are making their way from Jerusalem, where they have seen him destroyed, to a place called Emmaus (which has now long disappeared). Mourning, shocked, these two friends are on the verge of fighting, they are so devastated by their disappointment, and the ghastly way their hopes foundered. Meeting a fellow-traveller who urbanely asks why they have such long faces, they spell out to him the disaster they have suffered. They even hint that there is something funny going on at the tomb, but they haven't had the heart to enquire about that.

At this point the man they have met suddenly turns on them, reproaching them for their stupidity and actually for spiritual *ungenerosity* ("hardness of heart"). Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he taught them to read all the words that spoke of himself. Then he says:

So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer, and so enter into his glory.

What we have been doing tonight is to follow that path, beginning with Moses - that is, Genesis and Exodus - and going through the prophets, to read the words that Jesus took up in his life and his preaching, and to see how the Old Testament prepared us for this suffering Messiah, for our rebirth in Baptism, and for the path of sacrifice. In our minds we perfectly reflect the two disciples, with their grim faces and heavy hearts. We must let the Christ address our sorrows and disappointments, and show us how to turn round and go back to Jerusalem, the city of festival: how to find the shattered Church suddenly transformed into something eternal, a new humanity.

You can see how it is written that we too should rise from suffering, and to inherit glory as our destiny. Lent has been a time for us to face up to our poverty and grief, and stop covering them up with twenty-first century self-indulgence and excess. Alongside this we reclaim the community which death has ravaged, and in coming together we find the risen Christ standing in our midst. Now Christ invites us to enter into fifty days of feasting, unpacking little by little the significance of what his resurrection means for us. If we follow the path carefully, we shall say with those first two catechumens,

*Did not our hearts burn within us on the road,
as he spoke to us and opened the Scriptures to us?*