

Homilies for April

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Passion Sunday (April 4)

Is 50:4-7. Ps 21. Phil 2:6-11. Mt 26:14-27.66.

Christians all over the world gather this week to remember Christ's passion, to trace his lonely journey to Calvary, to devoutly remember his suffering and death. It is the suffering of Jesus that brings us the utter humanity of God made flesh, the true sign of what it cost Jesus to be incarnate.

Many people suffer in different ways - some with great physical pain or handicap, others with difficulty in their relationships, many who feel unloved or unwanted or unimportant. Others are still torn apart by grief, often many years after the experience of death, the pain and loneliness and anguish undiminished by the passage of time. There are those too who are tormented by their own weakness, who no matter how many new beginnings they make still find that they fall again and again.

For all who suffer, the suffering of Jesus offers great hope. In his passion, he experienced real care which helped him endure and understand - from Veronica with her towel, Simon with his strength, the women with their tears, Mary and her fidelity. In his torment, despite his feeling of abandonment, he had no doubt that some people still cared and that made all the difference.

Jesus must have felt most abandoned and useless as he hung on the cross. It was to take him three hours to suffocate to death and in that time he must have wondered whether it had all been worthwhile. And yet this was the most powerful moment of his life when he showed his

unconditional love, his willingness to choose God's plan, founded on justice and truth and honesty rather than violence and hate.

Today then, as we recall his passion, let's think of ourselves as part of the crowd that gathered to watch the man condemned to die. On this Good Friday, at this point in your journey of life, whom are you like: Mary? John, his faithful friend? Pilate, who washed his hands? Herod, who jeered but was also interested? Joseph of Arimathea - a follower but secretly lest others mock him? Peter, who betrayed him yet sought forgiveness? Judas, who could not believe in the possibility of forgiveness? The band of disciples, looking on from a safe distance? The spectators, present but uncommitted? Or possibly, like Jesus himself, suffering intensely and struggling to make sense of it.

To recall Christ's passion without being challenged ourselves would be a travesty. There can be no following of Christ without embracing the cross. Our Eucharist today only makes sense if it reflects the presence of the cross in our own lives and our willingness to be of loving service. No-one ever said it would be easy - but hard as it is to face the cross in our lives, let us remind ourselves that in the cross alone lies the key to eternal life, the means of our salvation.

Easter Sunday (April 11)

Acts 10:34, 37-43. Ps 117. Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6-9. Jn 10:1-9.

It is all summed up in that simple phrase from Matthew: 'I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified: he is not here, for he has risen as he said he would.' What message does that gospel have for us tonight?

There is something in us as human beings, created in God's image and likeness, that always searches for the best. In spite of frustrated hopes, unattained ideals and different disasters, we look for a world where there will be no more evil in its manifest different forms, where things will work out and happiness will be possible. We aspire to a world of true freedom, flawless justice, lasting happiness, enduring peace. We need to know if such hope is realistic or simply an ill-fated pipe dream.

Issues like peace, happiness, justice and freedom are important. Despite our inadequacies as people, we have them all to some degree. But everything we can attain here on earth in terms of our own aspirations remains vulnerable to death. The tragedy of death hits all of us. Communities, families, spouses and individuals can all be devastated by the death of a loved one. Death faces us into the deepest questions of the human heart. Is there any ultimate meaning to life? Is there any point to our existence? Is there any answer to human pain and suffering? It is to such questions as these that Jesus provides pointers tonight.

We all long for a life free from sin and evil and free from the devastation and destruction that death brings. That is the life which is offered in Easter. On the first Easter Sunday Jesus conquered evil and destroyed death. Betrayal and self interest and torture and violence and greed had done their utmost and lost out to the power of faith in God's love. Easter says that evil and death do not have the last word, that the Father who created us was not content to stand idly by and see his handiwork destroyed. In Christ and his resurrection we have been

given a share in the power and life of God and nothing can destroy that freedom and hope and life for us.

St Augustine tells us that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. We can say too that our lives are pointless until they are rooted in the Easter life that God offers with real hope and possibility. Here alone lies the potential for being truly human and truly alive - here alone, in this Easter life, lies the capacity for fullness of life, because here alone can evil and sin and death be faced down. It is a life of promise and possibility, born of the unconditional love that led Jesus to the cross

What we celebrate tonight is our salvation, our being given fullness of life, here and in the world to come. Tonight we stand proudly before the world and proclaim good news. We are God's creation, his chosen people, the people of the new covenant; we are the ones for whom his only Son took flesh, for whom that same Son died in agony on the cross; we are the ones who tonight can celebrate a gift totally unearned, the gift of life, of fullness of life, of life without end.

Second Sunday of Easter (April 18)

Acts 2:42-47. Ps 117. 1 Pet 1:3-9. Jn 20:19-31.

I wonder how many of you can remember the little green catechism, the one with 443 questions which had to be learnt off for Confirmation. Question 283 was 'Which are the chief commandments of the Church?' and the answer was as follows:

The chief commandments of the Church are:

- 1 to hear Mass on Sundays and holy-days of obligation
- 2 to fast and abstain on the days appointed
- 3 to confess our sins at least once a year
- 4 to receive worthily the Blessed Eucharist at Easter time
- 5 to contribute to the support of our pastors
- 6 to observe the marriage laws of the Church

The notion of the commandments of the Church struck me when I looked at the gospel for today and read the line where Jesus says 'Whose sins you shall retain, they are retained, whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven.' Lent and Holy Week have come and gone and we have celebrated the whole vision of the new life that is offered in Christ, the possibility of freedom before God, of being whole and complete and alive in ourselves. But I can't help wondering how real that is for all of us, particularly for those who have not taken the opportunity of confession.

For many people confession is pass?, something for the older folk and not part of a modern Church. How sad . . . and how dangerous. I believe there is a considerable risk in celebrating the resurrection without a real effort to confront the need for it in personal terms. If I do not examine my own life and see the areas where I need to die to sin and selfishness then I cannot in a true sense participate in the life that is offered to me in Easter.

But let us be quite clear - sin is not so much about the actions or omissions in our lives, it is much more about the kind of people we are in our heart of hearts. The word used in the New Testament for sin is a Greek word, hamartia, which really translates as 'missing the mark' or 'not achieving one's potential'.

Jesus made it clear that there are two central principles involved in being his followers: our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Anything that affects either of those relationships in a negative way, be it greed or selfcentredness or a lack of charity or whatever, is what we call sin. To have damaged those relationships is to have missed the mark about being human, to have fallen short of what it means to be made in God's image and likeness.

If you are serious about Easter, if the resurrection is to be more than a nice idea which is only relevant in terms of death, if you want to take the gospel to heart, then think seriously about the whole issue of confession in your life. Confession is in many ways the forgotten sacrament. It is easy to delude ourselves that things are ok, that we do not need to submit our lives to anyone else. We need to be clear that it is not an optional extra in Christian living - it is part of the direct teaching of Jesus himself - without genuine repentance and sincere confession, we cannot in any true sense lay claim to the new life that Jesus offers. Sadly, we can continue to ignore confession, but only at very great cost to ourselves.

Third Sunday of Easter (April 25)

Acts 2:14, 22-33. Ps 15. 1 Pet 1:17-21. Lk. 24:13-35.

Recently a lady called to my home to have a Mass card signed. It was obvious that she was not well herself and it was more than just her physical condition that was getting to her. As we talked a little, she said: 'Father, did you ever feel like giving up - that you've had more than enough? Well, the way it is now I am beginning to get bitter - I'm not sure I even believe in God any more. It's just one bad thing after another.' She went on to tell me some of the list of tragedies and difficulties that have struck her family and her friends over the last few years. It was a sad story of bereavement, of physical illness, of family problems, of general suffering. She had come to the end of her tether. She had enough of bad news.

Her experience is reflected in the story of the two disciples walking away from Jerusalem. All their dreams had come to naught. They were hungry and lonely and tired and probably quite frightened about what would happen if they stayed in Jerusalem. They were upset because Jesus was dead. Life was difficult.

The truth is that human life is difficult - not all of the time but certainly for much of it. It is particularly so when we are lonely, hungry or tired - when we are lonely for the companionship of another, for the sense that we actually matter to another human person, not just taken for granted; when we are hungry for a word of affirmation or recognition, longing for an opportunity to belong, desperately wanting to be loved; when we are tired of life and its trials, unable to take the pain of human existence, fed-up with the hassle of simply existing.

When somebody finds life difficult, they need the support that only the Lord can give - and if they do not find that support in us, then for them the Lord is very absent indeed. You and I together make up the body of Christ, the Church, his real, tangible, concrete presence on this earth. If our celebration of Eucharist is to make sense, if we are to be truly the body of Christ,

then we must be, individually and collectively, people whose lives make a difference to others, especially in their moments of hardship and difficult.

The Church is about salvation, about the fullness of life that Jesus alone can offer. But without you, without your friendship and support and care for the people amongst whom you live and work, salvation will remain for many a very hollow dream. With your help, the gospel can truly become good news. To be an Easter people is to turn around and face Jerusalem, to leave behind the place of despair or desolation or grief and to set our eyes on the kingdom of God, based on the single fact of the offer of salvation in Christ.

Clopas and his companion left Emmaus immediately to return to Jerusalem - for them there was an urgency about proclaiming the gospel of the resurrection. We can often despair about our empty churches and our declining congregations and can readily blame our young people. We need to take a long hard look at ourselves and our reality as the Church. Do we in fact proclaim in our lives, again and again and again, the great message of salvation in Christ, not as something to come but as something lived here and now?

What we celebrate at Easter is our salvation, our being given fullness of life, now as well as in the world to come. At Easter we stand proudly before the world and proclaim good news. We are God's creation, his chosen people, the people of the new covenant; we are the ones for whom his only Son took flesh, for whom that same Son died in agony on the cross. The real challenge of God's word is to make that message come alive, to take the word from the celebration of Eucharist and give it flesh in our own lives. Then and then alone will others begin to recognize him in the breaking of bread.