

## Homilies for April (C)

Patrick Treacy

### Palm Sunday

April 1

Lk 19 : 28-40. Ps 23. Is 50 : 4-7. Ps 21. Phil 2 : 6-11. Lk 22:14 - 23 :56.

In his seminal work *'The Hero with a thousand faces'* (1949) Joseph Campbell identified three essential stages in the journey of a hero's life. The first stage is *departure* from home, family and friends. The second stage is *initiation*, being the stage where, through trials, the hero discovers what he is seeking and the spiritual message that his life is meant to convey and be in service of. The third stage, and the most difficult, is *return*. At this point, the hero realises that he must return from where he came and bring back the spiritual truth that was missing and which he has now found.

There is a great temptation in the hero's journey not to return. Having departed to find the spiritual truth at the heart of one's life, there is a strong desire to remain withdrawn and avoid the challenges and complexities presented by where one came from. The contrary to this is found in one way of imagining the transfiguration of our Lord after the revelation of His glory on the mountain top. One can imagine that He then faces towards Jerusalem, resolves to descend the mountain and return. For Palm Sunday marks the return of Jesus to the madness of the human condition, the entry of divine love into human sinfulness, the arrival of all that is beautiful, good and true into the disturbed complexity of human affairs. It marks the entry of life into death and the resurrection of life thereafter.

The courage of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem says something profound to each one of us about our attitude to conflict. Only the psychotic seeks out conflict. Yet there is a tendency to deceive ourselves that the spiritual life necessitates the avoidance of conflict. When we have moments of initiation, of inner clarity, of a sense of God's love within us, they are not meant to distract us from the challenges of entry into the murkiness of this world. Rather they are meant to embolden us, with faith and courage, to face our own Jerusalem, return down from the mountain top and embrace the daily challenges that await us. The Christian life is not a withdrawal from the world but a call to engagement with it at a much deeper level, from a place where one is an instrument of the Lord acting in one's life.

The readings on this day make one unifying point – the struggles of the world cannot be avoided by the Christian. Every Christian is called to be a hero because *the* hero of mankind is meant to become incarnated uniquely in each one of us. This calling involves continuous hardship. This is what makes it authentic and Christian, for it presents the greatest challenge – forgiveness and love of one's enemies. In Luke's account of the Passion of our Lord, we hear the words of Jesus upon the Cross "*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.*" These words of Jesus, as He is being reviled and tortured beyond our comprehension, are proof, if it were needed, of the complete presence of God in Him. His conduct is the exemplar of that which is advocated by the prophet Isaiah, to offer no resistance and yet not to turn away, to be untouched by the insults and to set one's face like flint. Yet, Jesus stands for something even more, the challenge to offer forgiveness and love to those who

unjustly attack you and to live with joy in the midst of all of this. This is *the* challenge of the Christian life.

### **Easter Sunday**

*April 8*

Acts 10 : 34-37-43. Ps 117. Col 3 : 1-4. Jn 20 : 1-9

In the Gospel account of the Resurrection on this Easter Sunday, there is one peculiar feature in the narrative. When Peter enters the tomb, he sees the linen cloths on the ground and also the cloth that had been over the head of Jesus. This cloth was not with the other linen cloths upon the ground but rolled up in a place by itself. The cloth that covered the face of Jesus is not discarded but is placed carefully to one side. That which unveils the face of the resurrected Christ is treated differently.

St. Paul places special emphasis upon the face of the resurrected Christ, having not witnessed the physical face of Jesus himself. He writes : *'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'*. (II Cor 4 : 6) Paul's words stress that the face of Christ, not just the narrative of Christ's life or the words of Christ or even the work of Christ, is a source of knowledge because it is the bearer of glory. The reading of this Easter Sunday from the Gospel of John marks the culmination of the gradual revelation of the glory of Jesus in this gospel. Beginning with the wedding feast of Cana, the glory of Jesus is first revealed to his followers and then to the whole of creation in His passion, death and resurrection. The full revelation of divine love, the glory of God, is revealed in the face of Jesus upon the Cross. The journey of Jesus towards the Cross is a gradual unveiling of glory, moving in exact step with the outward closing in of Jesus' mortal fate. The followers of Jesus who have seen His glory gathering throughout the ministry have been made ready to receive the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of resurrection. For prior to His passion and death, Jesus prays to His Father by saying *"And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one."* (Jn 17 : 22) The mission of Jesus now becomes theirs by the gift of the Spirit and we, as believers, when working and witnessing in the Spirit, are equipped to share in the same glory.

What does this involve in real terms? It means that one decides each day to turn one's face towards the face of Christ in prayer. When this happens, gradually through prayer, a resurrection of the Lord begins to take place within one's own soul. As the attractiveness of Jesus begins to take centre stage within oneself, a new integrity begins to emerge in one's life. With the resurrection of Christ within the human person, one's life begins to take on a new order, a new cohesion. One's whole person and actions become integrated around Him in the way that the filings on a page revolve around the magnet beneath it.

For myself, the single most important truth in Christian revelation is something which I have learnt from my friendship with Peter Hannan S.J. and which is emphasised throughout his more recent writings. It is that when we make the time and space for prayer and allow ourselves to be gradually attracted to the glory of Jesus Christ, our whole person and lives become integrated in a new order around Him. I use the word *integritas* (latin for integrity) to describe this phenomenon of how the beauty or glory of Christ, being resurrected within oneself through prayer, leads to an integration of

one's whole person and relationships around Him. In John's Gospel, Jesus promises this when He says that " *And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.*" (Jn 12 : 32) When we are drawn to His glory and His resurrected presence becomes the centre of our lives, a new cohesion and meaning emerges in our lives. This is what we yearn for and it is for this that we have been made.

### **The second Sunday of Easter**

*April 15*

Acts 5 : 12-16. Ps 117. Apo 1 : 9-13. 17-19. Jn 20 : 19-31.

The scientist and writer, Richard Dawkins has gained considerable media exposure in recent times with the publication of his book '*The God Delusion*'. His book and the ensuing media debate raises a perennial theme – the relationship between religion and science and the apparent tension between rational deductions and spiritual experience.

The Gospel of today tells the story of the encounter between the rational, scientific Thomas and the Lord. Thomas first refuses to believe in the resurrection of Jesus unless the empirical evidence is laid before him. He demands that he must see and touch the wounds of Jesus before he will believe. This pre-condition to belief by Thomas draws no condemnation whatever from the Lord. Rather, there is an invitation issued to Thomas to test the evidence and he is openly encouraged and facilitated by Jesus to do so, to touch and see His wounds.

Christian revelation does not lose anything by being tested in the fire of reason. Christian faith does not seek to avoid rational enquiry but demands it so that what one is left with after such scrutiny is more mature and humble. We need to discern the difference between religious experience which cannot withstand rational scrutiny (i.e. magical and fantastical) and that which emerges when the limited confines of our rational faculties have been included, exhausted and transcended (i.e. the mystical). These two forms of religious experience can be termed the 'pre-rational' and the 'post-rational'. Sometimes they can look very similar when they are, in fact, utterly different. Authentic religious experience is not anti-rational, it is transrational. It embraces the questioning mind but one is drawn into a mystery which the rational mind has no longer any capacity to assimilate.

Earlier this year, I was present at the funeral Mass of a dear friend and mentor, Eltin Griffin O.Carm. During the magnificent homily at his funeral Mass given by Christopher O'Donnell O.Carm., I was struck by the importance of making this distinction in the life and work of Eltin Griffin. The homily recounted how Eltin had returned to Kinsale in 1991 and 1992 when he served as prior to the Carmelite community there. It was noted that while he had great affection for Kinsale, he was less than enamoured by examples of popular piety such as the time he was asked to say Mass for the healing of a sick cow. "*What sort of grasp of the Paschal Mystery did that show?*" he groaned to colleagues. Yet, Eltin was one of our foremost authorities on the practice of *lectio divina*. He taught how through this process of prayer, the mind grapples with the Word of God and one is then ultimately led beyond the mind into the mystery of the Word through the grace of God. The person who clings to the rational cannot experience truth at this level. There is no '*God delusion*'

at work here but rather a humble surrender by the mind to the infinite greatness of God and the opening of the heart to divine love.

Science and in particular, cosmology, can really help us with including and transcending our fixation with rational understanding. The study of the Universe on its largest scale can give us a profound reverence for the unimaginable enormity of God and the severely limited nature of our collective rational powers. In 1995 the Hubble Space Telescope photographed galaxies ten million light years away. One light year is the distance a ray of light travels in one year, equivalent to nine and a half trillion kilometres. Our sun is part of a galaxy of two billion stars (the milky way) and our galaxy is just one of a hundred billion galaxies in the Universe. The most distant galaxies are so far away that their light takes some ten billion years to reach us even though light rays travel so fast that they could go seven times around the world in a single second. In short, our minds cannot even begin to truly fathom the enormity of the universe. If we are so limited in what we can understand of the created, it behoves us to approach the question of our Creator with awe and not with arrogance. The mind cannot dismiss what it cannot understand. To do so is contrary to the most fundamental principle of science. When our minds dismiss that which we have no ability to comprehend, there is a delusion at work – but it is not about God.

### **The third Sunday of Easter**

*April 22*

Acts 5 : 27-32. 40-41 Ps. 29. Apo 5 : 11-14. Jn 21 : 1-19

The Gospel of today is set on the lakeshore of Tiberias. Having recognised Jesus on the lakeshore, the disciples approach Him and see that there is some bread there and a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it. The narrative recounts that Jesus then stepped forward, took the bread and gave it to them, and the same with the fish. As this gospel passage continues, Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves Him. When Peter confirms his love for the Lord on the third occasion, Jesus says to him, *'Feed my sheep'*. On this third appearance of Jesus to the disciples, He feeds them. On the third affirmation of Peter's love, Jesus directs him to feed others.

The emphasis by the resurrected Christ upon feeding His disciples, and they in turn feeding others, resonates with the profoundest need of the human person. The human person is a hunger, a divine longing which can only be filled by God. Every addiction and compulsion in our lives is a vain attempt to feed that which can only be filled by God. We bury our inchoate and repressed longings for intimacy with God by the endless variety of consumer goods or relationships that are immediately available or convenient. We assuage our wanting with temporal concerns which can never satisfy the depth of our longing. No thing and no human relationship can bear the weight of our longing for God.

It is of course true that we are in the first instance a physical hunger. We are embodied souls and we have a basic physical hunger that must be met. The material provision of bread and fish meets this need of the disciples who have worked on the lakeshore through the night. These two elements also have a deeper significance, however, in that they point towards the body of Christ, which is what truly satisfies the spiritual hunger within us. St. Augustine put it so succinctly when he said that *"God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him"*. We hunger for God because God hungers for us.

We may experience this hunger as restlessness or the desire for something more, which we may not be able to adequately identify. This hunger may manifest itself in dissatisfaction with our work and with an absence of meaning or purpose in our lives. The question arises as to where do we find the nourishment that we need. For the Christian, it is found primarily in two places, in prayer and in the celebration of the Eucharist. By having the courage to make the space for silent prayer, the hunger within us can truly emerge. We are afraid of silence because it speaks to us of loneliness, of being disconnected, of something being missing. Yet, there is a hidden wholeness at the heart of things. That hidden wholeness can only be discovered if we get to the deepest level of things through the language of silence. While silence empties us, in the Eucharist, we are fed with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. For the Eucharist places before us and fills us with *the* most glorious vision, the raising of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of divine love, which is the centre of our lives that we hunger for.

One of the great problems of our time is that people are being offered so many different forms of therapies and ‘spiritualities’ which may offer some temporary relief to the spiritual hunger that we are but which never provide a lasting solution. Only the love revealed by Jesus Christ can do this. We need to re-discover a new confidence within the Church, rooted in humility and yet in a conviction that there is no spiritual nourishment available anywhere to the human person that can match the glory revealed by Jesus Christ and participation in the Eucharistic celebration.

#### **The fourth Sunday of Easter**

*April 29*

Acts 13:14,43-52. Ps 99. Apo 7:9,14-17. Jn 10 : 27-30.

“*The Father and I are one.*” So says the Lord in the final sentence of the Gospel for this fourth Sunday of Easter. While this statement may appear to be quite abstract, it centres upon a burning issue at the heart of Christian faith today – what does it mean to be at one with God? What does oneness with God mean? Claims to having oneness with God abound in the New Age movement or more particularly, claims that there is no separateness between ultimate reality and the human person. Pronouncements such as “*the power is within me*”, “*you create your own reality*” or even more simply “*I am that*” are at the heart of many aspects of the New Age movement. They find particular support in a branch of Hindu philosophy termed as non-dualist or *advaita vendanta* and pioneered by Shankara (788-820 CE).

The Christian revelation, however, says something quite markedly different from this. Firstly, the Christian truth is that we are not one with God *but we are not two either*. In other words, we are separate from God by reason of our sinfulness and the limitations of our human condition. Yet, it is precisely through our broken condition that God’s mercy and presence enters into us, joins with us and makes us at one or atoned with Him. Christian faith always holds these apparent opposites together, that we are one with God and not one with God at the same time. It is a paradoxical sense of oneness exemplified by the Eucharist in that in the mystery of this celebration we are all in one body and that one body is uniquely present in each one of us. In other words, our relationship with God involves the integrity of unity in our diversity and diversity in our unity. A balance must always be kept between the two.

A difficulty arises when we only comprehend one side of this paradoxical truth. If we succumb to the belief that we are completely separate from God, we lose our relationship with God and any hope of experiencing the loving, providential, benevolent presence of God in this world. This occurs when we excessively stress the transcendence of God without reference to the immanence of God. One could say that the reforms of Vatican II were in response to this imbalance and sought to express Christian faith in a more tangible, immanent and connected way to the faithful. The problem which we now have, however, particularly with the advent of the plethora of New Age spiritualities, is the complete opposite excess in that we succumb to the belief that there is no distinction between us and God, particularly God as Spirit. We are immersed now in an excess of immanence and we have lost the sense that God is transcendent. We have lost a healthy understanding of our innate sinfulness and a proper sense of awe and reverence for God. Relativism abounds because our transcendent anchor in God has been lost. The Christian faith stands for both, however, God as immanent and transcendent, wholly present and wholly other at the same time.

There are certain images which reflect this truth. The first is that of a mosaic. Each one of us is a piece in an infinite, divine mosaic. We are each indispensably part of the totality while remaining an individual part. We can choose to turn to the centre of the mosaic and add to its cohesion or innate oneness or we can rebel against the beauty of the totality and be discordant. Another image is that of the vine and branches. Jesus says He is the vine and we are the branches. It is true to say that the branches are part of the vine as well but Jesus maintains a distinction between the vine and branches. In being branches, we are part of the vine. As part of the vine, we are branches. Both realities must be maintained. Perhaps the truth is best revealed in the Christian understanding of marriage. The man and the woman become one body in Christ and yet they remain two. They must remain two or no relationship of love can exist between them. The persons of the Trinity are one and yet remain separate as three. If their diversity is not maintained in their unity, the relationship of divine love, which they wish to reveal to us, cannot exist between them.

For the Christian, however, there is one other indispensable truth in addressing the question of oneness with God. It is that oneness in every aspect of creation comes through the *logos*, Jesus Christ, the centre of creation. He is the centre who holds all together in one and gathers all that is scattered and fragmented. He does this through His resurrected presence in our own souls and in our relationships. In the current excess of immanence, however, there is a tendency to dilute the transcendent significance of Jesus Christ. St. Paul tells us that while we are all members of the body of Christ, He is the head of the body. In our limited understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ, the paradoxical balance must also be maintained. The resurrected Christ is immanent in our lives and yet also transcendent, for the incomparable significance of Jesus Christ cannot be relativised.

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Patrick Treacy is married to Linda Rainsberry and they facilitate *Integritas*, a domestic centre for Christian spirituality, at their home at Ennisnag, Stoneyford, Co. Kilkenny. Further information about this centre can be found at [www.integritas.ie](http://www.integritas.ie)