



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: April 11, 2004 Easter Sunday
Title: **"After The Passion."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 10:34-43
Second Reading Colossians 3:1-4
Gospel Luke 24:1-10

Irish Murdoch, the late, great British author, writes in one of her novels about a man named Barney who, in the course of the Easter service, suddenly makes a discovery.

*The Christ who travels towards Jerusalem and suffers there can be made into a familiar. The risen Christ is suddenly unknown. This...had always in the past represented for Barney simply a disappointment, like the ending of a play. He had never thought of it as a starting point. ... It became clear to him, with a sudden authoritative clarity, that it was the risen Christ and not the suffering Christ who must be his saviour: the absent Christ hidden in God, and not that all too recognizable victim. He was too horribly, too intimately connected with his own degraded image of the Christ of Good Friday. Easter must purge that imagery now. [The sufferings of Christ] appealed to something in him that was too grossly human since he had not the gift of compassion. These sufferings ended for him in self-pity. This could not alter him a jot though he contemplated it forever. What was required of him was something which lay quite outside the deeply worked pattern of suffering, the plain possibility of change without drama and even without punishment. Perhaps after all that was the message of Easter. Absence not pain would be the rite of his salvation**

This passage from contemporary fiction helps us to counteract an impression we might get from yet another even more contemporary work, the film *The Passion of the Christ*. In that work, we see very, very little of Easter, but a whole lot of Good Friday. The physical torture inflicted on the body of our Lord in the film is gruesome and shocking. Many people leave the cinemas moved and disturbed. The viewer thinks, as the film is designed to make one think, that Christ underwent this suffering for the sins of the world, and more particularly, for *me*. Christ crucified becomes the God of *my* condition, especially if my condition is one of failure and humiliation. We may be consoled at the thought of God sharing our suffering. But if we only experience ourselves as suffering victims, then the Cross becomes the symbol of who and what *we* are, not who *Jesus* is.

To find in the suffering of Jesus a way of making sense of my own is not in itself bad, but it runs a risk. I can turn that suffering and that cross into a defense of my position. God is identified with my cause, because he suffered for *me*- died for *me*. Jesus Christ as so personal a savior becomes not a redeemer, but an ally. If I suffer with Jesus, then *I must be right*, no matter what my cause may be, because God "shares my pain." This can make Jesus' cross exclusively a symbol of *my* suffering opening the way to using it as a weapon against others. It is saying first, "*My* suffering is deeper, more significant than *yours*," and then, "Nothing I inflict on you is comparable to what you have inflicted on me." This is, you will notice, is the logic of terrorism, be it terrorism in the relationships of a troubled family, or the terrorism that takes lives in the major cities of the world.

The cross ceases to be an ideological weapon when it is recognized not only as *mine*, but as that of *a stranger*, too. And it is a *stranger* whom we meet on Easter morning. To leave our relationship with Jesus on the level evoked in the main by the film, and any number of other Christian devotions concerning Christ's sufferings, is to be left with a martyr for a cause: remembering the good man Jesus and the terrible things they did to him.

But Easter won't let us do that. The women on that first Sunday morning came to the tomb looking for a martyr's body and all they found was emptiness: an emptiness that was soon to be filled with a Person who wasn't quite the same as the man they

were mourning and eulogizing. "You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified," they are told, "*he is not here.*"

Easter takes away the personal satisfaction of having a "fellow-sufferer," and perpetuating the sad memory of a friend who died. Jesus doesn't burst from the tomb to tell us that "our side won" so that we can use that fact against our enemies, real or imagined: those whom we believe are responsible for our problems. Instead, Jesus comes back as much of a *challenge* as a comfort to us. He tells us that it was "*His side*" that won, and that we may or may not be able to identify ourselves with that team because of our tendency to want to have power and control over others. That is why he comes as a *stranger*: one who is not immediately known, one who is *not able to be used* even for religious purposes. As C.S. Lewis tells us in "*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*" about the Christ-figure Aslan, "After all, he's not a *tame lion.*"

Some Christian writers, in attempting to be contemporary and inoffensive, try to make the Easter experience something that is familiar and comforting. The Resurrection, they claim, is about the community of the Church realizing that Jesus is alive *in them*, and that his *memory* lives on in the attitudes they keep and service they perform. But that's not what the Bible really says. The appearances of the Risen Christ are never easy or happy events: they are filled with terror, with confusion and with doubt, as the troubling last words of Mark's Easter story tell us about the women at the tomb: "*they were afraid.*" The Jesus that the women, and later the disciples too, thought they would have to deal with, the memory of the dead hero able to be used and abused by his adoring public, simply *wasn't there*. The Person who *was* there was the Risen Lord, telling them in no uncertain terms: "Don't try to *use* me. Don't try to make it *your* cross upon which I died. It was *my* cross and the victory was *mine*. Now you can share it, if you choose, but you must still deal with me *as I really am*. The collective memory is *not good enough*. The record of my words and deeds is *insufficient*. You must deal with me now who am your Lord, your Savior and your Judge. You can be *part* of me, but first you must see what I've done has been not only for *you*, but for the whole world." No, this risen Lord is *not* a "tame Lion."

That is the importance of the Church in the experience of Easter. We exist here not just to think nice thoughts about a tragically dead Jewish rabbi. We're not even here just to tell the world that He suffered and died on the cross... *just like in the movie*. The Church exists to maintain a relationship with a real Person who continues to manifest Himself to us in many forms: in words, in bread and wine and in other people. These meetings with the Risen Christ are not always sweet and easy, but they are *real* because the Jesus we proclaim is not just the fulfillment of our religious fantasies, or the attempt to hijack theological symbols for our personal needs. The Church is constantly rediscovering Jesus as the One who is both *with us* and *beyond us*: we are *in Christ* and yet at the same time *face to face* with Him as he challenges us to seek for the other what we are so quick to ask for ourselves.

So you just may be here under false pretenses. The *dead hero* you were looking for isn't here. The tomb is empty. And the Risen Christ demands your attention.

* Iris Murdoch, *The Red and the Green*, (Chatto and Windus, 1965, Penguin Books 1967, p. 230. Citat: Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003).

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