

Homily: Easter Sunday, 12th April 2020

Next year, as many of you will know, I hope to lead a group of members of our parish on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I've always wanted to go there, but have never yet had the chance. It's often struck me how wonderful it would be to go to Bethlehem, where our Lord was born; to look out over the Sea of Galilee, a scene which our Lord knew so well; to go to Jerusalem and to walk the Way of the Cross, tracing the footsteps of Jesus on His final journey. The Holy Land has been described as 'the fifth Gospel': visiting these places where our Lord lived and ministered can bring to life in a new way the reality of His presence among us.

Strangely enough, one place that I'd never really felt any great attraction to visit was the site of our Lord's burial. I find myself drawn by the places where the Lord walked, where He taught the crowds, where He worked His miracles. But the site of His tomb? I suppose I always thought it would be interesting, but not life-changing, to visit this place of death.

But then the penny dropped. This tomb – unique in all the world – is not a place of death. This is not just the place where the Lord was buried. It is the place where the resurrection took place. Here, Jesus conquered death; here, He opened the gates of heaven for us; here, at the empty tomb, the Lord began the new creation in which everything, finally, is made perfect. The tomb of Jesus is the place where God said, in the face of death, "Let there be light". In that place, quite literally, heaven was made present on earth. Now, as I think about visiting the Holy Land, the tomb of Jesus is the place which excites me most. I find myself captivated by the thought of simply being able to stand there and consider: here the Lord rose from the dead. This is where it happened. I imagine myself standing in awe and wonder, allowing the truth of the resurrection to be brought home to me, by standing on the spot where it actually took place.

Every year on Easter Sunday the Church invites us to the empty tomb. In today's gospel we do not hear of an appearance of the risen Lord, but only of the empty tomb and those who discover it: Mary Magdalen, the Beloved Disciple, and St Peter. Mary comes to the tomb early in the morning, while it is still dark – the darkness of death, the pain of grief, is still very much with her. She comes, presumably, to weep and to grieve for the Lord. But when she sees that the stone has been rolled away, she perceives that the tomb is empty. But she does not yet understand. "Someone has taken Him from the tomb", she tells the others. When they reach the tomb, they go a step further – they enter it. They see for themselves that the Lord's Body is gone – the tomb is empty, except for the burial shroud and the cloth which covered Jesus' head – these too have been denied their captive. The tomb is empty. The burial shroud is empty. Death has been robbed of its significance, its meaning. The Lord has risen.

The Beloved Disciple saw and he believed. The empty tomb fills him – it fills him with faith, with joy, because he understands that Jesus is risen. He has not seen the risen Lord, but already he understands. This is exactly where we find ourselves today. We do not see the risen Lord with our own eyes, but we are presented with the empty tomb. We too are invited to believe, and to allow this knowledge of the empty tomb to fill us with hope.

The tomb may be empty, but the disciples are filled with faith, with hope, with joy. Jesus, too, is filled – He is filled with the fulness of life. Death has no more power over Him. He will never again suffer, grieve, experience pain, hunger, loneliness. Although still present on earth in His risen Body, He already enjoys the life of heaven. He offers this same life to us. He wants us, too, to be filled. Already we are called to share in this life, to leave behind all that drags us down, and to begin to experience the joy of being close to the risen Lord – the joy of knowing Him. St Paul tells us today, “Since you have been brought back to true life in Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand. Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth... your real life is hidden with Christ in God.” The life of the risen Lord may be, to an extent, hidden from us, but this is where our real life is to be found, St Paul tells us. Raise your mind to Him! Raise your heart to Him! Do not be dragged down by the problems, the grind, the failings and the sufferings of this life, but raise your mind and heart to the Lord. Look to Him, and there find your true life. It is a beautiful invitation.

Shortly after this scene, Mary of Magdala became the first person to see the risen Lord, the first witness to the resurrection. She who was first to come and grieve at His tomb would be the first to see with her own eyes the risen Lord. Looking to the things of heaven does not mean being blind to the sufferings of this world; rather, it means allowing them to be seen in the light of the resurrection. In the sequence today, Mary says, “Christ, my hope, is risen”. Yes, Mary. Christ is risen. Our hope is risen.

At the end of today’s Gospel, we are left with a simple but remarkable scene: the disciples, stood in the empty tomb, looking on the Lord’s burial clothes, clothes He no longer needs. Till this moment, we are told, they had failed to understand that He must rise from the dead. Even for the disciples, knowing this truth, believing this truth, was a gradual realisation, a dawning. Whatever you feel on this Easter morning, my prayer and my hope for you, for all of us, is that we too share in this dawning light, this knowledge that the Lord is truly risen. It is no longer dark. The tomb is no longer occupied. Death no longer has the final word. May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds on this Easter Day. Amen.

Fr Andrew

