

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Easter Day (Year B) 31st March 2024

'On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realised the new wonder; but even they hardly realised that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven, and a new earth...'

[The Everlasting Man]

So writes G K Chesterton, pondering on the meaning of Easter: 'The world had died in the night...' Whatever can he mean? He means that Easter changes everything. It looked as if life was limited by death, physical restraints, weakness, stones across tombs, the passing nature of things; it looked, until today, as if life was a steady descent, slipping downwards into weakness and death. That is the world that died in the night - because now we know it is not so. Life is not defined by its limitations, by slipping downwards: the fundamental direction of movement, for the disciple of the Risen Lord, is not downwards, but upwards. He is risen, so that we can 'rise up in the light of life' (Collect). Even as age and infirmity try to tighten their grip on our bodies, we know that this is not how the story will end. It will end not with slipping downwards, but with rising upwards.

The world that died in the night, the world of slipping ever downwards, ever lower, still exerts a strong hold, and leaves behind a powerful toxic legacy. We can easily be seduced back into thinking in that old way. We can easily become disillusioned: disillusioned with the madness of the world that we live in, with its self-indulgence, its anger, its greed, its polarisation, its obsession, quite frankly, with the trivial and unimportant and its apparent blindness to that part of human existence which truly matters. Sometimes this can seem almost overwhelming. It is easy, too, to become disillusioned with the Church - if only it would be more as I want it to be! How can we live the full beauty of a Christian life in a world that has lost its way and a Church that sometimes seems to have lost its confidence?

Easter offers us the answer. It is much more than just a nice feast that marks the end of Lent and a return to chocolate. Easter does actually make our lives better. It makes them better in the long run, of course, because it reminds us that we are already living the beginnings of eternal life. But it makes life better today, as well, because it reminds us, in our darker moments, that for the believer the fundamental direction of the human life is upwards, not downwards. 'Rising up' is the norm for the disciple of the Risen Lord. It gives us the power to blast through those things that seem to hold us back, to blast through those things that make us feel paralysed by disillusionment, depression or even despair. Easter reminds us, as we look at how many people still seem to live according to the old way, the way of sinking ever downwards, that we do not live, as we are often told, in a post-Christian world. No - we live not in a post-Christian culture but in a pre-Christian culture, a culture that still lives according to the old ways, according to the dynamic of loss and sinking, a culture that is still waiting to hear that there is something better. That world died on Easter night, but its legacy lives on.

It would be so easy to let ourselves be defined by disappointment, and many people do. Their lives have not turned out as they had hoped, they have not achieved what they wanted and perhaps now time they feel that is running out. Disappointment becomes like a great stone blocking them from the future. But on Easter Day the stone across the tomb is blown aside, and so can our disappointment be. Christ, rising up from the tomb, reminds us that upwards is the new direction of travel, and he reaches out to us to pull us up with him. However life might seem to have let us down, down is not the way to go. Whatever stones may seem to block us from the way to joy, to fulfilment, to a sense that all is well can be blown aside by this great festival of rising up. The world is not as we would wish it to be, and it seems bent on slipping downwards. That is a shame, and we wish it was not so. But my little bit of the world, the bit immediately around me, the bit I have some control of, well here I will have none of the slipping downwards, I will stick to the Easter rising up. I will have the new world, not the old, dead one. I will not settle for slipping downwards, whether that is defeatism, or negativity, or compromise with a world of self-indulgence and the self-deception that says 'this is all you get, there is no unseen life'. These attitudes can become quite pervasive, slipping into even the best of lives, but Easter is our great annual reminder that they are a fake.

Easter tells us that, however bad things might seem, however difficult life may be, it can get better. And it can get better because I can get better. The dead Jesus, imprisoned in a tomb, could not be held captive, and broke free. He broke free to make us free. The stone is gone. Whatever tomb imprisons us - doubt, anxiety, failure, fear, mistrust, disappointment, the stone is gone and we are free to leave, free to rise up and follow. How will we use that freedom?

As we leave the church at the end of this Mass, this will be the fundamental question. How will we use the freedom Christ has won for us and given to us? He calls us to rise up, as he has risen up, in a world that all too easily settles for sinking lower. Will we choose to use that freedom wisely? Will we rise up above all the things that seem to limit us and hold us back? Will we believe that even if we cannot change the whole world, we can at least change the little bit of it where we are? Will we accept the challenge, and join the Risen Lord in becoming a rising people?