

HOMILY FOR THE EASTER VIGIL  
20 APRIL 2019 YEAR C

I once heard it commented that the ringing of the bells at the intonation of the Gloria on Maundy Thursday and then again at the Easter Vigil at the same point, somehow made it seem like they were one celebration. And then this one celebration opens up in sacred time from a fundamental unity to a sort of 'trptych' of three celebrations, the Mass of the Last Supper, the Good Friday liturgy and the Easter Vigil, opening on the hinge of those ringing of bells.

If there are links at a liturgical level, then there are also links, albeit of a different kind at the biblical level. There is an obvious link between tonight's gospel from Luke, as this is a year of Luke in the readings, and the reading of the St Luke Passion last Sunday. The Passion ended on Palm Sunday with an account of unnamed women. It went thus: 'Meanwhile the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind. They took note of the tomb and of the position of the body. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. And on the sabbath day they rested, as the law required.'

Tonight's gospel continues with these same women. The sabbath is over and they come to the tomb to find that the stone has been rolled away and that the body of Jesus is missing. Instead there are two men in brilliant clothes, who terrify them and who chide them 'Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he is risen'. Had they forgotten, the angels ask that Jesus himself had said that he would be handed over and crucified but that on the third day he would rise again? Then we are told, that the women remembered his words.

We hear that the women went to tell the Eleven and the other disciples and at last, and only now at this point, do we hear their names. They are Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. The word they carry and the words of Jesus that they remember, give them their identity. We too, you and me here tonight in this celebration, we are given our true identity by faith in the risen Christ. We are who we are because of this true identity we are given, our Christian names.

Of course this does not come all at once, particularly not where the men are concerned. For when Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Mary the mother of James come to the apostles, there is an abrupt let down, because 'this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them'. Typical men, some of you here may think!

Well not quite all of the men perhaps, because Peter runs to the tomb (we will hear about him running to the tomb again in tomorrow's gospel for Easter day), but for him at this point there are binding cloths but nothing else in the tomb, no vision of angels or message of resurrection. He goes away amazed. So our gospel tonight ends.

However, Luke's gospel account of the Resurrection continues and memorably with the story of the road to Emmaus, of two disciples, one called Cleopas, who are walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, disconsolate and set at naught by the crucifixion and disconcerted by the women's message. Jesus appears to them but they do not recognize him. Now I know this Gospel belongs to the Wednesday of Easter week, but I want to draw attention to two details which seem to me to tie in with the passage we did hear and to help us to make further sense of it.

Jesus rebukes the two disciples, rather in the way that the angels chide the women for not remembering that the resurrection has happened as Jesus said it would. The rebuking of Cleopas and his companion goes further, however, because starting with the books of Moses, the Torah and then going through all the prophets, he explained to them all the passages throughout the scriptures which were about himself, and which explained why it was necessary that he should suffer before entering into his glory.

We do not know the precise texts Jesus used on that seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. I can think that some of you may already feel that you have been on a seven-mile walk this evening, listening to the seven Old Testament readings of the Vigil – though in fact we only had five of them, cunningly leaving two miles still to go. But our readings this evening, whether or not among the ones used on the road to Emmaus, certainly did point us towards the suffering of Christ and his entering into his glory. We have a Christian name and we have a Christian story.

We heard of the story of creation, because the Resurrection is the beginning of the new creation, the 8<sup>th</sup> day when God again will say that it is very good. We heard of Abraham called to sacrifice his son; the writer to the Hebrews describes it this way: 'He offered to sacrifice his only son even though he had yet to receive what had been promised ... He was confident God has the power even to raise the dead; and so figuratively speaking he was given back Isaac from the dead.' Figuratively; but God gives us his Son back from the dead literally and for our salvation. God saved the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt at the Red Sea, leading his people

through the deep waters; Christ leads us through the deep waters of death from our slavery to sin to the new life of the resurrection. These all came from the books of Moses, the Torah. We heard from two of the prophets in our Vigil; from Isaiah who spoke of God's promise that the love of God would always be with his people and in the psalm that followed that reading we heard 'O Lord you have raised my soul from the dead, restored me to life from those who sink into the grave'. In the prophet Ezekiel we read that God will give his people a new heart and a new spirit, cleansed of all defilement, a heart of flesh for a heart of stone. In the prayer which concluded that reading, immediately before the Gloria and the bells we prayed that what was cast down might be raised up.

I said there would be a second point drawn from the Emmaus story. You will be glad to know I can tell it more briefly, barely a fifth of a mile to go. Jesus is recognized by Cleopas and his companion in the breaking of the bread and he disappears from their sight. They rush back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples they have seen the Lord; and there they find that in fact Jesus has already appeared to one of the disciples, only this time he is called not by his nickname Peter, the rock, who we last saw coming away from the tomb in a dazed amazement, but he is called by his given name Simon. Luke says: 'They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them: 'The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon'.'

When the risen Lord appears to you he shares with you his story, he gives you his story, from creation to now, as your own, he gives you a destiny which is to be with him and he calls you by your name.