

Maundy Thursday

Jesus is alive, and in him we have our life.

This, I think, should be the starting point of our retreat over these days of the Sacred Triduum. As will be sung at the beginning of Mass this evening, following St Paul, 'We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection, in him we are saved and made free.' St John of the Cross, that great sixteenth-century reformer of the Carmelites, mystic and spiritual guide, taught that the Christian life finds its meaning in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that through our baptism we are committed to allowing Jesus to work out the meaning of his dying and rising in our own lives. If this were not true, why would so many people in ordinary years make the effort be present here in Ampleforth every year to celebrate, genuinely to participate, in this memorial of Our Lord, crucified, buried and risen? It is these last few days of Holy Week, of Jesus' earthly life, that give meaning and significance to our lives – whatever our circumstances and whatever our needs – and which bring the possibility, the reality, I should say, of joy and life, of healing and renewal, of faith, hope and of love.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were given the choice as to whether they would choose life or death; whether they would choose the ways of God or whether they would choose to remain in their sin, to cling to their own ways and even to worship the false gods of their own creation; or whether they would acknowledge the source of their origin, the one true God in whom all goodness, beauty and truth are found. In Jesus, this promise of life is fulfilled: as he taught in St John's Gospel, 'I have come so they may have life and have it to the full.'

But what we are offered in Jesus is not simply a good life, a happy life, a life free from troubles or worries. In Biblical terms, we are not simply offered a return to Eden, the Fall having been reversed and somehow an idyllic human life having

been restored to us. What we are offered is something considerably more: we are offered a real sharing in, a participation in, the life of God Himself. We are offered something genuinely new, something that helps us transcend ourselves, something that changes and transforms us; we are offered life and we are offered hope.

This is what Easter is about: this is what we have spent the six weeks of Lent preparing for, so that, as St Benedict teaches, we might ‘look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.’ As an act of His supreme love for us, God the Father sent His Son into the world, becoming flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to break down the barriers that in our weakness, our frailty and our fear we have managed to put between ourselves and God. Although we have been created good, indeed ‘in the image and likeness of God’ and so for intimate relationship with Him, as imperfect human beings we have a tendency to look for fulfilment in ourselves, not to mention our habit of falling into sin. So, for example, we might think that to be successful we just need to work hard (or harder), that a particular relationship will lead to fulfilment, or that owning certain things we desire will improve our lives, or that if we were to lose ourselves in various forms of entertainment – or even in sinful dissipation – we will be happy and our problems will go away. To some extent and to varying degrees, we all think and do these sorts of things, and we do so because on some level they make us feel better, they seem to fill a gap, if only for a while, but in the end – if we are honest with ourselves – we know they are not the answer. But, thinking and acting differently feels like a risk: what stands in our way is our implicit assumption that these things help us to make sense of our lives and the worry that if we were to give them up we would be lost – even when we know, at least intellectually, that God’s love will embrace us and all of these things, putting them in the proper order in our lives with Him at the centre. This is part of the challenge of faith, and it takes some courage, not to mention God’s grace, to respond to Jesus’ invitation to live for God and not for ourselves, to place our hope in Him alone – so that everything else can fall into its proper place.

If we feel daunted by this, then we can take encouragement from the First Letter of St John in which the author reminds us that in Jesus ‘we have our advocate with the Father; he is the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours but the whole world’s... when anyone does what he has said, God’s love comes to perfection in him.’ In other words, Jesus has already done the hard work – our task is to turn to God and to allow Him to be active within us, to repent, and in humility and love to acknowledge our absolute need for Him. Jesus’ death and resurrection have opened for us the possibility of a new relationship with God, one that is free from fear and characterized by hope and love – most especially God’s love for us, which over time changes us, drawing us ever closer to Himself, turning us evermore into the image of Jesus: a risk, perhaps, but in the end there is no need to be afraid of surrendering our attachments, our concerns and preoccupations – finally surrendering ourselves - and seeking to live with God at the centre, because as St John teaches, ‘perfect love drives out fear.’

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is the sign that fear, sin and death have been overcome, and heralds the new life of Christians. You will remember how at one of Jesus’ resurrection appearances the disciples thought that they were seeing a ghost; but Jesus’ resurrection is real, and it has brought about our salvation, and so, we should have hope. If we commit ourselves to Our Lord, then through faith and love, we open ourselves to His transforming work in us, not that our lives will simply become happy and free from all trials and distress – this won’t happen, as it didn’t for Jesus (his resurrection came only after the agony in the garden and his crucifixion on Calvary) – but that through all of the experiences of this life, some of them difficult, some of them filled with joy, we might learn to love God truly – for Himself and as the answer to our deepest needs – and truly to become His disciples.

Tonight, then, we will celebrate the Mass of the Lord’s Supper and the institution of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The first reading, the account of the Passover in the Book of Exodus, recounts for us God’s liberation of His people, drawing

them out of slavery in Egypt, the blood of the Lamb daubed on the lintels of their doors being their protection and also the foreshadowing of the blood of the Lamb that would be shed on Calvary for the salvation of all people, freeing them, freeing us, from slavery to sin. And we will hear St Paul's account in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the earliest written record that we have of the Last Supper, of the tradition that has become the central act of Christian worship, 'the source and summit' of our lives, as the Second Vatican Council taught:

This is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death.

We celebrate the Mass, then, at the Lord's command, and because it brings us salvation. St Thomas Aquinas' prayer, *O Sacrum Convivium* summarises its meaning and saving power succinctly:

At this sacred banquet at which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, and a promise of future glory is given to us.

When this reality is really thought about, who could not want to be there? In the new covenant of his blood, the Lord has taken us to himself, and in our reception of his body and blood in communion – or today in spiritual communion - we share in his redemptive death and resurrection, which has the power to forgive our sins, to heal us, and to draw us ever closer to himself, if only we would allow this.

But, of course, this is not always our experience of prayer and worship or of the Christian life; sometimes it can be just the opposite – as, in fact, St Paul also knew. As he wrote to the Romans:

I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate... In fact, this seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand. In my inmost self, I dearly love God's Law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?

Fortunately, for St Paul and for us, he had an answer: 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' In other words, St Paul knew – just as we do from our own experience – that we have a powerful tendency to sin and that the only remedy for this lies not within ourselves (or in any of the things that we think might make our lives better) but in God through Jesus Christ in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

So, what it seems we need to do, then, is to learn to have faith, so that our hope may increase, and our love be purified, to become genuine. We need to learn to recognise the signs of God at work in our life and in the lives of others.

Near the beginning of his Gospel, at the start of the second chapter, St John says that the miracle of turning water into wine at Cana was 'the first of the signs given by Jesus.' But, of what was it a sign? It cannot simply be a sign that Jesus had a supernatural power that enabled him to turn water into wine, or that he knew a rather classy conjuring trick. St John adds, very importantly for us, that by this sign Jesus 'let his glory be seen, and his disciples believed in him.'

By saying, 'let his glory be seen', St John meant that the people, at least his disciples, were able to get a glimpse of just who Jesus really is – the Incarnate Son of God, the Christ, the Redeemer of the World, the Word of Life – just as he was revealed at the Transfiguration when he was seen with Moses and Elijah, his clothes shining more brightly than any earthly whitener could make them, and the

voice of his Father was heard, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.' It must be this glory that the disciples recognised.

The celebration at which Jesus was present at Cana was a wedding feast. In the Old Testament, especially in the writing of the Prophets, God is pictured as having chosen His people to be His bride, and in the New Testament Jesus is described as the bridegroom. In becoming a man, in becoming just as we are in the Incarnation, God through Jesus has united Himself to us, as a bridegroom is joined to his bride in marriage. As Isaiah writes:

No longer will you be named 'Forsaken' nor your land 'Abandoned', but you shall be called 'My Delight' and your land 'The Married.'

The image of the wedding feast represents the life of Heaven, a life with God, sharing in His love and His glory, sinners, forgiven through Jesus' death and resurrection, now having a share in the life of God Himself.

The wine that is drunk at this feast, at this wedding banquet, is the 'new wine of the Kingdom' that Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper, a wine symbolized in the turning of water into wine at Cana, a wine which in the Mass becomes Jesus' blood through which we have our salvation.

The Wedding Feast at Cana, then, is a sign of both the Eucharist and the Divine Wedding Feast in Heaven (the 'Banquet of the Lamb') of which our participation in the Eucharist, our sharing in the Mass, is already an anticipation. This is the sign that the disciples saw, the sign that revealed Jesus' glory, a glory which St John tells us he had with the Father from the beginning and has now been made known to us.

The account of the Last Supper that we will hear this evening is also taken from St John, and is the well-known account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, an act of humble loving service, which we are called upon to imitate and which in normal years is re-enacted in the Mandatum. Unlike the other three evangelists, St John

does not record Jesus' offering of the bread and wine and his identification of these with his own body and blood given for our salvation – arguably, he has already done this in his 'Bread of Life' discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum in chapter 6 – but rather concentrates on Jesus' demonstration of the depth of his love for humanity and his commandment that those who would wish to be his followers should love others in the same way and with the same love with which he loves us: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.'

This evening's Gospel begins as follows:

It was before the festival of Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his own in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.

This is the love of which Jesus spoke to his disciples after the Last Supper, as recorded by St John, when he said, 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends'; and as St Paul wrote to the Romans what proves that God really loves us is that God the Father sent his Son to die for us whilst we sinners; and then we are told that we must 'be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Well, what a challenge! How are we, all too aware as we are of our weaknesses and the sins that are the consequence of our disordered desires, to learn to love like this? It isn't easy, and growth like this takes a lifetime – we have only to look at the example of the saints to see this – but, fundamentally, the answer lies in humility, becoming – or better, allowing ourselves to become – genuinely humble, so that, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus may live in us, bringing us to the Father in the fulfilment of his love. As we also hear Jesus say in St John, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.' This is why St Paul can write to the

Galatians, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live by faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake.' In the same that way Peter at the Last Supper had to allow Jesus to wash his feet, we have to allow the Lord into our lives, into our hearts – into the very depth of our being – so that we can be transformed by his love, and so learn to love as he loves, to love, in fact, with that selfsame love.

St John of the Cross knew this love of God dwelling within him, expressed perhaps most eloquently in his poem 'The Living Flame', but he also knew the bitter depths of suffering; and the circumstances of his life seem to suggest that these two wildly contrasting experiences are somehow related.

John re-edited 'The Living Flame' in difficult circumstances towards the end of his life, circumstances which included a campaign of libel against him and the possible failure of the reform of the Carmelites he had worked for with St Teresa of Avila, the way to God to which he had given his life. As he wrote in a letter at the time whilst staying at a desert monastery:

I'm in excellent form, glory be to God, and things are good. This desert freedom is helping me greatly, soul and body... though my soul is faring very poorly. The Lord must want it to go through a desert of its own.

Remarkably, whilst experiencing a desert within, a lack of the presence of God - no doubt influenced by his external troubles and difficulties - John could re-edit a poem that describes the most intimate communion of his soul with God, holding to his faith in a God who loves him. His desire was not for a repetition of the experience that led him to write 'The Living Flame', but for God himself. This is resurrection faith: as we read in the First Letter of St Peter, 'You did not see him, yet you love him'. John could remain steadfast in his faith in a God who loves and who saves, whilst finding himself in a spiritual desert, because he had come to

learn to love God, the God who is love, who teaches us to love, and in so doing orders our desires with Him at the centre and everything else in its proper place.

John was greatly attracted to natural beauty, and for him created beauty was simply beautiful – people, art, nature. But, and this is our point here, what concerned him most was not so much the people or the things that are loved, but the loving heart itself – this is where freedom and slavery are played out. As he wrote,

We are not talking about giving things up, because this does not strip the soul if her affective drive remains set on them. We are talking about stripping away the craving for gratification in those things. That is what leaves a person free and empty in their regard, even though she still owns them. Because it is not the things of this world that take up space in the person or do her harm.... No, it is the will and the hunger for them that dwells inside her.

If, then, we are to learn to love as God in Jesus loves us, our desires need to be purified, because a disordered desire chokes our openness to others, creating a possessiveness in our attitudes towards other people and to things, limiting, skewing, corrupting, our ability to love. John speaks of the ‘bonds of ownership’ that ‘occupy the heart.’

As a modern-day commentator on John observes, ‘We become as big or as small as the objects of our love. When the horizon out of which I am living is God, there is room to breathe. When it is less than God, the world becomes suffocating.’ And this is the point: to learn to love as God loves, to love as we are called to love, we have consciously to choose God and place Him at the centre of our lives. This does not mean that other things are bad – this is not John’s doctrine at all – but, everything needs to be in its proper place, in its proper order. This involves self-denial in the sense of setting oneself free by saying ‘no’, so that our hearts may be made pure. St Benedict puts it thus, ‘Your way of acting must

be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else' and 'Deny yourself to follow Christ.'

It is part of the Christian mystery that somehow suffering and the love of God are not incompatible; and tonight, in our celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper at the beginning of this Sacred Triduum, we will recall Jesus setting out on his path of self-sacrificial love in which his absolute and infinite love for us, and for the whole of humanity, will lead him to the glory of the resurrection only by way of suffering and death. This deserves, even requires, our time, our attention and our prayer.

Glory be to the Father....