

“CONTEMPLATING THE FACE OF CHRIST IN HISTORY AND IN ETERNITY”

Homily – Easter Sunday 2019

Introduction

While Easter this year in the Catholic world may be tinged with sadness for the burning of Notre Dame Cathedral, nonetheless, we can give thanks for the miracles that have happened, especially the preservation of the façade and towers and other parts of the Cathedral due to the heroic work of the Parisian firefighters. And there were other miracles as well.

One such miracle is thanks to the chaplain of the Paris Fire Department, Father Jean-Marc Fournier, who walked into the burning Cathedral to save the Blessed Sacrament and also a precious relic that had been preserved there for some 800 years: the Crown of Thorns that was imposed on Jesus' head during his Passion. It is quite providential that this precious relic was saved from fire during the very week of the year when the Church commemorates our Lord's Passion through special ceremony and spiritual discipline.

Historicity of Christianity

The Christian world is blessed to have many remnants still with us from Christ's Passion, which are preserved in many sacred places throughout the world. Surely the most well-known is the famous Shroud of Turin, the cloth that covered our Lord's body as he lay in the tomb. We hear reference to this cloth in the Gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb. We hear, for example, in the Gospel for Mass today: “When Simon Peter arrived . . ., he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there.” Notice that there were other burial cloths as well; they, too, are preserved in different shrines and churches in various parts of the world, but it is the Shroud that gives us a physical record of the brutality of the Crucifixion that Jesus endured for our salvation.

St. John's account of the discovery of the empty tomb makes note of another article found there. He tells us that, in addition to the burial cloths, Simon Peter saw “the cloth that had covered [Jesus'] head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.” This is what has come to be known by the popular title of “the veil of Veronica,” the cloth that holds the imprint of the Holy Face of Jesus – the true icon, “*vera icona*,” of Jesus. It was placed on his face over the Shroud, and we see how St. John here is very deliberate in pointing out its presence, with a very precise description of its position in the tomb.

This veil is now kept in a small mountain village two hours outside of Rome. By a gift of God, last January I had the extraordinary opportunity to venerate and pray before this holy relic of the Passion. I learned that it is made of a precious and unusual material incapable of holding color, and yet, unlike the Shroud, it is full of color and the eyes are open. The face is very alive, and the eyes penetrating. It would appear to be a picture of the very first instant of the Resurrection. Contemplating such a holy relic of the crucified and resurrected face of Christ fosters in the soul a desire to see the face of God directly, and serves as a reminder that we will all do so at the end of our earthly pilgrimage when we will render an account to God for our lives in this world. There are many other such relics in the world. But what, though, do they teach us?

First, they all trace their origin back to the Passion, death and Resurrection of Christ. This is the first important lesson: the Resurrection is an historical fact. And we don't need such precious relics to know this, as important as they are to give us a sense of connection to these historical events and to deepen the devotional life of Christians. But we have other ways to know this as well.

We have, first of all – as we also hear in the Gospel for today’s Mass – eyewitnesses to the historical fact of the Resurrection. They saw the empty tomb, they experienced the post-resurrectional appearances of our Lord. And it cannot be admitted that they were making this up, for the Gospel writers had no reservations in displaying the sins, weaknesses and very embarrassing foibles of the key protagonists in this story, something they surely would not have done if they had to cover over a hoax. Moreover, all of these key protagonists suffered severely for holding to the narrative: imprisoned, exiled, tortured, killed. Certainly they would not have willingly endured such profound suffering merely to pull a prank on the authorities.

This is the unique claim of Christianity, that it is rooted in history, that it springs from actual historical events and, above, an historical person: Jesus of Nazareth, the co-eternal Son of God, Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, who took on human flesh and became man in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary; who worked in a carpenter’s shop, who preached, healed, prayed and exorcised demons; who was unjustly condemned, tortured and executed; who rose from the dead and returned to his Heavenly Father in glory. But Christianity does not keep us in the past. The second lesson we learn is that the Christian faith orients us toward the future, or, better yet, toward eternity. These historical events all lead up to a transcendent, eternal end: eternal life in God’s Kingdom. That is why God saw to it that these events happened, for the sake of our salvation; this is God working out His plan of salvation for the world in our human history.

Personal History

As for the world, so also for each one of us in our personal history: God works out His plan of salvation for each of us in the concrete historical events of our personal lives. The first and most important such event is the historical fact of our baptism. This is where we received our common Christian vocation, the call and the grace to die with Christ by dying to sin in our life, so that we may be joined with him in the glory of his Resurrection. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul uses vivid imagery to illustrate this point: “Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened... [L]et us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Unleavened bread, of course, evokes the memory of the Passover: God liberating His people from slavery by miraculous signs and wonders. The Christian vocation is to live in the true freedom of the children of God: free from the slavery to sin to be a “fresh batch of dough” as St. Paul puts it. It is this sense of “freshness,” or “newness,” that most signifies the authenticity of Christian faith: it is the freshness of youth blended with the wisdom typical of those who have lived long and well; a life animated by Christ and by the realization of the truth he reveals in all its beauty; a life ever youthful and ever serene.

The Christian vocation, though, is lived out in the context of a personal vocation that God gives to each one. The personal vocation is also rooted in history: most commonly, it is marked by an external act, typically some kind of vow or promise by which one binds oneself out of love for the sake of another: marriage vows, public vows in consecrated life, ordination and the promises the ordinand makes to his bishop and the Church, and so forth. The personal vocation defines who we are, it comes from God; we cannot be who we truly are, the person God created us to be, without persevering in our personal vocation to the end. This forces us to live that Christian calling of death and resurrection in Christ in small and sometimes large practical ways, day in and day out. That historical moment in which we bound ourselves for the sake of another

out of love changed us for the rest of our lives; indeed, if we live the meaning of that moment according to God's plan, it changes us for all eternity. For those with mind and heart open to the movements of God's grace, God works through the historical events of their personal lives to lead them to the fullness of life in His Kingdom.

Conclusion

All of this is God's gift to us, a help for us to ready ourselves to receive His greatest gift of all: the Resurrection of His Son from the dead. If we live this gift of God well, the gift of our Christian and personal vocation in the historical circumstances of our life, then we will be prepared for the moment when we will look at the true, unveiled face of His glorified risen Son, and be found fit for sharing his glory in heaven. This is the gift of true Easter joy, rooted in historical facts that, for the active believer, become mysteries of salvation leading to eternal life. May God grant us all the grace of an open mind and open heart, so that, at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, coming before the façade of His eternal Kingdom, we may be admitted past the threshold, where we will behold the beauty of His countenance in the company of the saints, world without end. Amen.