

Easter Sunday Homily – Plymouth Cathedral - 2020

In the middle of the third century, in the year 250, a plague started in North Africa and it spread across the whole Roman Empire during the following years. The things which had been a source of the Roman Empire's strength - its trade routes, and its good communications system, by road - now became the means through which this plague became extremely virulent and destructive.

Modern Scholars of historical medicine think that it was something like an Ebola virus. At its height, five thousand people died each day, in the city of Rome. It went on for nearly twenty years and in Rome alone something like a million people died.

It is described as "Cyprian's plague". St Cyprian was Bishop in Carthage in North Africa, and he gave vivid descriptions of what was happening. One of his contemporaries there describes the fear that is engendered, and sometimes the lack of humanity:

"There broke out a dreadful plague, and excessive destruction of a hateful disease invaded every house in succession of the trembling populace, carrying off day by day with abrupt attack numberless people, everyone from his own house. All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion, but exposing their own friends, as if with the exclusion of the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself also."

Non-Christians claimed that the plague was brought upon the world by the gods wanting to punish humanity. In the face of this belief, Cyprian pointed Christians to Christ, God with us, who takes on our suffering and death. In one famous passage, he sees that we are to see in those who suffer, not the curse of God, but Christ among us. He writes;

"What a grandeur of spirit it (shows) to struggle with all the powers of an unshaken mind against so many onsets of devastation and death! (so) stand erect amid the desolation of the human race, and (do) not.....(give up as).....those who have no hope in God. But rather.....bravely show

forth our faith, and by suffering endured, (let us) go forward to Christ by the narrow way, that Christ trod, (so that) we may receive the reward of His life and faith.”

During the plague, Christians were known to tend to the sick and the dying. They stayed with the bereaved to give them consolation and to assist with the dignified burial of the dead. Their nursing, their compassion, their service of others, was so effective that in the cities and regions where there were a large number of Christians, the rate of death was cut by half. Because of their example, in the period following the end of the plague, Christianity became even more popular and spread more widely across the whole of the Roman Empire.

I think of this episode in our history, because of course we see these events being played out in the streets, in the cities, and in rural communities, across our globe.

How urgently do we need to hear the message of today, “The Lord is Risen!” He has triumphed over sickness, over death, over darkness. These do not have the final word. We need to be like those Christians of the third century whom St Cyprian describes. We need to have messengers, like Mary Magdalene, who run from the empty tomb announcing that the Lord is risen.

In today’s Gospel, we have this lovely, in some ways rather humorous episode, of Peter and the beloved disciple known as John, running together to the empty tomb to see for themselves. We need to run with them to hear and see for ourselves that the Lord is risen and that the tomb is empty. And rather humorously of course, because John is the younger man, he arrives first at the empty tomb. Peter, whom we believe was in his middle years by this stage, arrives later.

In Catholic tradition, from this episode and others like it, St John and St Peter, describe two ways of life that are essential in the life of the Church. They manifest two aspects that we each have in our Christian life. John, the beloved disciple, the one who rested on the Lords breast

at the Last Supper, is the first to arrive at the empty tomb. In Catholic Tradition this has always pointed towards the life of prayer, to the contemplative life. St John represents that dimension and aspect of our inner life which calls us, to enter deeply into our prayer life, into our own inner selves, in order to discover there, the empty tomb, where the risen Jesus, has come.

In today's Gospel passage, this contemplative aspect doesn't enter the tomb, but gives way to Peter, which is a symbol of course of Apostolic Office. Peter and his successors point us, to that Apostolic Ministry of the Pope, successive Popes, through the generations, and Bishop's and Priest's and Deacons who participate in Apostolic Office. It's a very humble and beautiful thing, that those who live the life of prayer give way to Peter, so that he enters the tomb first. Only after that, does the way of prayer enter the tomb, too.

In our own day, the pastoral life of the Church, is to a degree on hold, in this period of lockdown. We do see nevertheless, in those extraordinary scenes, that have come to us from St Peter's Square, how the successor of St Peter, our Holy Father, Pope Francis points us, to the life of prayer, to the figure and the symbol of John. For in this period of lockdown, we cannot go on the streets, shouting the news of the resurrection, but in our own homes, in our own households, most especially in our own individual lives, we can experience the Risen Lord and that the tomb of death is empty.

We are called to make the journey of John the beloved disciple, to believe that we can rest our heads, upon the living and beating heart of the Risen Lord. Even in this period, He shows himself to us and invites us to drink deeply of his Risen life and light. And we can give thanks too, for those who in our midst, are participating through their love and service of others, in the Apostolic life. We see this in priests and religious who are tending to the sick and dying, and we see a life of loving service, too, in the many professionals who are caring for the sick and the dying, and who are burying the dead, with dignity and great love.

My dear friends, on this day, let us be with St Peter and St John, as they run to the tomb. Let us become more familiar with these two dimensions of the Church, so essential; these two dimensions of our own lives, which we need to befriend in our own way - the life of prayer and the life of apostolic service. In this way, we too, will come away from the empty tomb and proclaim with the Apostles, "Jesus Christ is Risen Alleluia! He is Risen indeed, Alleluia, Alleluia!"

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