

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, EASTER SUNDAY, 12TH APRIL 2020

The Easter proclamation is at the centre of Christian faith. This is the greatest of feasts, and the climax of the Church's year, when we rejoice in the crowning truth of our faith in Christ.

Now, we've never experienced an Easter like this one before, where our churches are closed to the public, where we can't gather as we normally do. But the way so many parishes have taken up the livestreaming, and how many Catholics, how many Christians, all round the world really, have been tuning into that, shows us that nothing can stop us celebrating the central event of human history.

In the Resurrection, we see God's defeat of death and sin, and the glorification of Christ, who passed through agony and death to set the world free. And his disciples, experiencing the presence of their living Master in his new and glorious state, became the witnesses of Easter faith before the world.

In our first reading today, St Peter proclaims, 'God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people but only by certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand. Now we are those witnesses – we have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead – and he has ordered us to proclaim this to his people.' This transformation of the disciples into witnesses begins with the empty tomb. So, for Mary Magdalene at the tomb in this morning's gospel account, and for those who follow her, Peter and the beloved disciple, who we believe to be John, the sign of the empty tomb is the start of their realisation of the amazing truth, which'll be confirmed by the appearances of Jesus in his risen and glorified body.

After their initial resistance to belief, it's their experiences of the risen Jesus that'll make them witnesses of Easter faith and joy. So we know many accounts from the New Testament telling of the Risen Jesus appearing to his disciples. St Paul even speaks of an occasion on which Jesus appeared to five hundred disciples at the one time. Now, from the gift of faith we've received from God, we have full certainty in the resurrection, but even just from the point of view of history, when you go carefully into it, the evidence seems impossible to reasonably explain any other way than by the truth of the resurrection.

The disciples were so convinced of the truth of what they'd experienced that they were willing to spend the rest of their lives spreading that truth and living according to it. And they kept to that witness even when it meant persecution and, for many of them, martyrdom. Then those who heard them and believed became witnesses in their turn. And their witness has come across the centuries to the present day, and in our own turn, we who have heard and believed have ourselves become witnesses of the Risen Lord. Even though we haven't literally seen with our own eyes, from our experience of faith, we give our testimony with the conviction of witnesses.

But what is it that we're witnesses to? Certainly, that Jesus returned to life in that same body which died upon the cross and was buried in the tomb. But his resurrection wasn't a return to ordinary earthly life, like Lazarus. When Jesus rose, his body was glorified, made into something new and wonderful. In raising Jesus from death, God has begun the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth breaking through into our universe.

We start to share in that new creation by being united with Christ, first in baptism and then in our whole lives of faithful discipleship. And one day, God willing, we'll share in it fully, if we persevere to the end. Firstly that'll be in our souls, when we enter everlasting union with God in heaven. And then finally in our own glorified bodies, when through the power of Christ's resurrection we ourselves rise again on the last day.

We're living through a time, with the coronavirus pandemic, when our need for the power of resurrection is especially obvious. Because when our lives are comfortable, we can almost start to forget that our time in this world isn't forever. But when the whole world is in upheaval, it's different. A time of anxiety for all of us, at best. In Australia, at the moment it looks as though we're going to escape the worst of it; but around the world for quite a number of people – and for some in Australia as well – it's meant suffering and death. It reminds us of the suffering and death, from all causes, that's always a reality in the world.

It reminds us that life is fragile, that we can't place our final hope in the things of this world. But our faith in the resurrection tells us that these things don't have the last word. The human experience of death in all its forms – not only literal bodily death but any weakness, suffering or sin – is now open to being transformed in union with Christ: for someone united to Christ in faith, every 'death', because it shares in Christ's death, will also share in his resurrection. So nothing that we suffer is meaningless or wasted. But like the suffering of Jesus, it now carries within it the power of resurrection, spiritual power for the world, and the seed of a heavenly reality beyond anything we can imagine.

And when we realise this, nothing can defeat us. Every cross becomes a pathway to new life. From death will come life, from evil, good. Even our sins, once we've repented of them, become the occasion for revealing God's mercy, and so for his greater glory. From the greatest evil, and what must have seemed like the greatest despair, came the greatest good and the greatest hope.

The death and resurrection of Christ have the power to turn around all the evil in our lives, all the evil of the whole of human history, because they possess unlimited divine value. And so they become the unfailing source of mercy and healing for the world. 'All time belongs to him and all the ages; to him be glory and power, through every age for ever. Amen.'