

Homily - Easter Vigil - 2009

“If Christ has not been raised, vain is our preaching and vain is your faith.” So wrote St. Paul to the Corinthians almost 2000 years ago. One may reasonably ask why, if the death of Christ merited for us forgiveness of sins and sanctification, showing God’s love for us, the Resurrection is essential, so essential that the Word of God says that our faith depends upon it, so important that this, the Church’s highest feast, is dedicated to this glorious event, the center of human history. St. Thomas Aquinas described five reasons why the Resurrection was and is essential; and I would propose two more regarding the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist that we will celebrate tonight.

First, on the most basic level, the Resurrection made the early Christians’ message undeniably clear and gave them the authority and ability to take on the Roman Empire. After all, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the faithful Apostles, the other disciples of Christ did not testify to an abstract idea that they could reasonably have been wrong about. Many reasonable and good people can and have lived and die for ideas, and been mistaken in those ideas. We think of the passionate fighting on both sides during our Civil War. But no one could be reasonably mistaken about what Mary, the Apostles and the other early Christian witnesses were testifying to. They were saying that Jesus Christ, whom they saw, and who all agreed had been scourged, beaten, crucified, killed, and even after death slain with a lance, was now risen; and that they personally saw Him, several times, now risen from the tomb and with a glorified body. No one could reasonably be mistaken about such a claim. Thus, one is forced into one of two conclusions, either (1) that the Apostles were madmen or liars, that such people lived and, in most cases, were martyred for the faith, and that such madmen or liars took on the Roman Empire and won; or (2) that they were absolutely right. They left no room for a watered down faith that maintains that they were good people generally right, but merely mistaken in some respects. One could say such thing about Socrates or Adam Smith or David Hume; one cannot say such things about the Apostles. The Resurrection will not allow it; the Resurrection calls us to a total commitment, a total faith given not merely to an idea or set of ideas, but to a person, Jesus Christ, God and man.

This commitment brings us to the second great reason why the Resurrection was needed. If Christ had not risen from the dead, He would be among the dead but not among the living. We would be left with His words, His ideas, but not with Himself, at least not on earth. If Jesus had not risen, we would be left with His corpse rotting in the grave. God’s justice would not permit the unjust murder of Christ to achieve such a result; and so, as the Psalmist says, He would not permit His beloved to know decay. Through the Resurrection, Christ is with us as one of the living; God did not merely come to earth to be with some humans 2000 years ago, but is with us here and now. He is with us in the Church, He is with us in prayer, He is with us in the Sacraments and in the Eucharist. And because Jesus is with us, our faith is a call not only to obey a lawgiver in the distance, but rather one who loves us and who calls for us to love Him. A lover does not wish to be away from His beloved, and so Christ wished to be with us living on earth, and the Father likewise would not permit the separation from us. God does not simply tell us from His throne, “Here is how you get to heaven; I hope you make it.” He came to earth, died for us, and is with us still.

His presence with us is especially powerful in the sacraments, and above all the Eucharist. Tonight we will celebrate the Baptism of one of our people, and the entrance into the Church of three others, all of whom will receive the Eucharist for the first time. We will also all renew our baptismal promises and prepare to receive Jesus again in the Eucharist, on this most holy of nights. Without the Resurrection, Baptism would certainly be a death to sin, a joining with Christ in rejecting sin and its author. But that would be it; there would be no joining with Christ in new life if Christ had not risen again from the dead. Certainly, the rejection of sin and Satan, the subject of the first three of the six baptismal promises, is critically important. Likewise, one must clear a field and keep it clean for crops to grow. But then one plants the crops for a glorious harvest. And likewise, we reject sin and evil that we may grow more into the new life that Christ won for us and showed us in the Resurrection. But, as St. Paul says, “we were buried with Him through baptism in death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” Rom. 6:4. We are called to a new life filled with the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, the Spirit that makes us co-heirs with Christ to everlasting glory.

To give us a share in the divine life even now, Jesus regularly comes to us in the Eucharist, which is the next great reason why the Resurrection is needed. Without the Resurrection, the Eucharist would be a corpse. For the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ, and for those terrible days between Christ’s death and Resurrection, the Body and Blood of Christ was separated from His soul, although still preserved by His divine person. Because soul and body were separated, the body was a corpse, which obviously could not be consumed. That is why the Church does not give Communion between the Good Friday liturgy and this Easter Vigil Mass, reflecting that time when Christ was dead and the Eucharist could not be celebrated. But now with Christ risen in glory, we can receive this life from heaven through the risen body and blood, now forever joined perfectly with His soul and divinity. When a mother feeds a baby, when a healthy person donates blood to an injured person, they are giving human life to another human, a glorious deed. But in the Eucharist, we have even more. We have the Divine Physician giving us Himself as both the medicine and life of the saints in heaven. There is a popular song, which says that Ireland was created when a part of heaven fell to earth, and the angels made it into that land. That song does not exaggerate, but understates the truth. In fact, not a part of heaven, but the divine King of Heaven, comes to earth, and offers us His new life from there in the Eucharist. Thus, Jesus says, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him on the last day.” John 6:54.

And, especially because Jesus comes into our very bodies on this earth, into our life even here and now, we will also rise from the dead, which is the fifth reason why the Resurrection is necessary. Jesus in fact promises resurrection to all of the dead, through His own Resurrection which is the cause of our own. Jesus does not simply say, “I promise the Resurrection” or “I will reward you with the Resurrection.” He says “I am the Resurrection and the life; whoever believes in Me even if he dies will live.” John 10:25. We are joined with Christ, and thus if He is raised from the dead, so will we be, for our great Brother will not leave His beloved to decay, leaving humanity forever separated. Jesus’ Resurrection is thus joined to our own life on this earth, promising that we will after death merely a disembodied spirit, but a human soul joined one day, that glorious day, to a risen body after the example of Jesus to join body and soul our Savior, His mother, and saints from every time and place.

And so, we must live now in a fashion worthy of that Resurrection, which brings us to the sixth great reason why the Resurrection is crucial, it gives us a model for our life on earth. For one, fundamental, undeniable, unchangeable fact of our existence here is that our lives on earth, as individuals and nations, will come to death. How we deal with this fact, or fail to deal with it, defines how we live. There are the Gnostic, Buddhist and similar “other-worldly” solutions that try to escape from life in this world, denying its fundamental reality, and seeking salvation merely as disembodied spirits. There is also the Stoic solution that one should not love anything or anyone in this world very much, for it will all end. More common these days is the materialist idea that salvation is in the world, and that one should simply build and have as much things and pleasure for as long in this world as possible, fending off death and the thought of it for a time, but knowing that it will triumph in the end. Perhaps most common is the superficially pleasant, but ultimately sad, view of the pleasure seeker who says, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” We, however, know as Christians that this body is like a tent that will be folded up one day, but then made into a glorious temple. See 2 Cor. 5:1-5. And so we invite Jesus into this tent that is our current bodies and lives on earth, committing them in purity and charity as living sacrifices of praise to God, knowing that our souls will dwell within great and glorious Temples based upon our holiness, our invitation to God to dwell within us on this earth.

And, likewise, God dwells in throughout the world in holiness, and showed that dwelling in the Resurrection. For, without the Resurrection, we would still look to heaven for some justice, but on this earth, sin and death would have triumphed, for they would have killed Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, and that would be the final message on earth, the Messiah in the grave. But as it is, on that glorious Easter morning life triumphed over death, and justice over evil. God had not abandoned the world, but had sent His Son back to save it. From that day until the end of time, the jaws of death would rage against God’s justice, would rage against the Body of Christ that is the Church, but as Jesus promised, they would not be triumphant. In this last century, we have seen the jaws of death rage against the Church and against the innocent, with war and famine, with tyrannies from the Nazis to the Communists to the current violence and tyranny from China to Somalia to the culture of death and decadence here in the West. But the Risen Christ and His Church will ever stand against them, will stand for the peace of God and the risen life He promises. The forces of sin and death will ever try to declare themselves triumphant. Thus, for example, thirty-six years ago, when the Supreme Court declared there was a constitutional right to abortion, the New York Times published a headline, “Supreme Court Settles Abortion Issue.” But, because of the constant efforts of the Church and all those on the side of the angels, the abortion issue was not settled then, is not settled now, and will not be settled until we treat all peoples, and especially those defenseless people in the womb as the sons and daughters of God. We know we cannot establish final justice on this earth, for humans are flawed and as long as this world lasts, we will always be prone to sin. But neither do we abandon this world or lose interest in righteousness and justice. Rather, we know as the Vatican Council declared almost half a century ago, “When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise - human dignity, brotherly communion, and freedom - according to the command of the Lord and in His Spirit, we will find them once again, cleanse this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to His Father an eternal and universal kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.” *Gaudium et Spes* 39. Tonight, we celebrate the promise of that Kingdom through

the Resurrection of Christ; tonight, we welcome a new Christian and these new Catholics into our midst; tonight we recommit ourselves, or rather as the risen Jesus to reconsecrate us, in our journey to that kingdom of light and joy that will continue into the ages of the ages.