

Homily Low Sunday 11th April, 2010.

Mass Readings: Acts 5:12-16; Apocalypse 1:9-13,17-19; John 20:19-31.

So this was the first Conclave of Cardinals, the first Bishops' meeting, the first deanery clergy gathering, the first Church assembly. What do you imagine the atmosphere was like in that room? I imagine it was dire. I'd say it was full of tension, guilt, remorse, anger, disillusionment, sadness, sense of betrayal, above all fear. The doors were locked – out of fear. The doors were locked on the inside too, out of fear. The women who'd come with their messages of Jesus' new life couldn't get in. Not much eye contact I imagine in that room; there would have been a lot of self-hatred and shame. They had denied, betrayed, and deserted Jesus when He most needed them. This was certainly the first great cover-up. It shows the Lord's chosen few in all their weakness. Peter, the one to whom so much had been entrusted, in whom so much had been invested, to save his own skin and that of the others publicly denied any relationship to Jesus, and so did all the others. By their collective silence and absence they had assisted in the brutal murder of the innocent, of the One who had done so much for them. It's a bit like the tenor of a current Times article isn't it? So what's changed?

Of course the apostles don't want to believe the women. How do you face what you've done, and who you are, by looking into the eyes of your victim? How could they possibly face Jesus? No, their refusal to believe the women is partly natural skepticism, but their reluctance is coloured also by the fact that what is being told them about His being alive is something too painful to imagine accepting. What could they say to Him? How could they look at Him? What would He say to them?

This is how it was in the beginning – chaotic and empty. This is how we are when left to ourselves. This is who we are. Could they themselves have sorted this out? How do you move forward when the whole thing is shot through with such catastrophic failure? It's over, it's over. So, as we heard this week, Peter at one point said: "I'm going fishing." The others went too. Life has to go on – it's over. And then suddenly He's there, showing them His wounds and wishing them peace. He wasn't recognisable at first because He was so other than anyone would have imagined possible – greater, deeper, more loving, more intimate, principally more forgiving. In that moment Jesus showed them that God understands in us what we are utterly incapable of understanding in ourselves, and loving in us what we can only despise in ourselves. He is more powerful than any personal despair, more forgiving than the most heinous of crimes, can cross any threshold no matter how impossible the divide – since now death, the ultimate curse has itself been conquered. That's incredibly hard to take in.

"Peace be with you." With all that they are carrying those four words were both hard to take in but also had infinite power. They're hard to take in because without Jesus we are utterly incapable of being like this ourselves. Not only in our behaviour of course – but the dead don't come back. Jesus came and stood among them and said....."Peace be with you." The apostles I imagine were only expecting what they themselves would be capable of saying: "How could you do this to me? How could you have betrayed me so atrociously?" Where were you when I needed you most – after all I have done for you?" What is most important possibly is what they don't see, what they don't hear. What they don't see or hear is what transforms their grief and pain into joy and delight, and changes them beyond all recognition.

In today's earlier Mass for Easter Saturday we hear in the Acts of the Apostles how the elders, rulers and scribes were astonished at the assurance shown by Peter and John in their preaching since they were only uneducated laymen, and then it goes on to say that they recognized them as associates of Jesus. They are not people who have received an education but who have made an encounter. They have been associated with something quite new in Someone quite new – and found a new freedom and strength and therefore assurance.

They don't see in the eyes of Jesus any trace of resentment or blaming. They don't hear in His voice any words of condemnation. They don't hear of any demand, but rather a request, a favour, and the offer of a gift. As I was sent, so I am sending you. I came with all the love of my Father, and I send you with all the love of my heart. How could they, the traitors, the deserters, the liars, the cowards, the deceivers, the false friends be those who are sent? How? Because as Paul writes to the Corinthians, a man whom Jesus had totally turned around. *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."* And also: *"Love keeps no score of wrongs."* We are called to grow into this likeness.

So, people can look at the history of the Church and ask, "So what's changed?" Nothing's changed. The Church is as capable of awful betrayals and mistakes now as it ever was. Nothing's changed in another sense too. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. We are here because of Him. He is our justification. He is our credibility. The credibility of institutions can always be shot to pieces. But the Church isn't simply institution. The Church is Christ Himself. It is His Body. What we say holding up the bread and the cup at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer we must say also with our lives, so that we become what we do here, what we celebrate here. *"Through Him, with Him, in Him."* There's no other way.

We are sent out by Him in the strength of His choice of us, His presence with us. His continuing choice and abiding presence. Through every one of our doubts, fears, betrayals He comes now and says: "Peace be with you." I know. I understand. I re-instate you. You are my witnesses, because you have been with me.