

5th Sunday of Year (C) 2013

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Have you ever had a mystical experience? Have you ever had a sense of sublime rapture which made you feel so utterly at one with the universe that you were in a state of ecstasy which was at once a state of peace and liberation and awe and wonderment? If you have, you are not alone. Many people claim to have at least one such experience; and for many it is the basis of belief in some higher Reality which is involved with the cosmos and with the minutiae of our lives.

Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk and spiritual writer, still very popular 35 years after his death, famously had a ecstatic experience as he was walking down the street and he felt total, unconditional love for everyone around him. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, had an experience of God which made him think that all his writing was 'so much straw' compared to what he had seen. He wrote nothing more. Isaiah, an important official in the court of the King of Judah in Jerusalem had an experience when at prayer in the Temple. He records it in the first reading we heard today. He sees the presence of God masked by the seraphim and, confronted with the majesty of God, he knows his own sinful insignificance. But God empowers him for God's work. That work was to be a prophet and confront kings, challenging them to have faith in God and not trust in their own resources.

Peter's encounter with Jesus echoes something of Isaiah's experience. Peter, exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally after a night's fruitless toil has agreed to a fishing expedition with this Rabbi. He knows the man is a healer - he has already healed Simon's own mother-in-law among many others in Capernaum; but he didn't suspect him of any fishing expertise. Wasn't he an artisan, a worker in wood and stone? Anyway, fishing was a night-time occupation. That was when the fish feed in the waters by springs and inlets, swimming conveniently together close to the surface. Simon Peter knew his lake and the fish therein. He was part of a successful partnership - it could afford to hire help. Jesus' fishing trip is bound to failure. But Peter feels obliged by the laws of hospitality and to repay the favour done for his family. Peter may be contemplating such things when pandemonium breaks out and fish begin to leap into the boat. So many the boat is sinking. In the calm that followed after control is established and the boats are making for home, Peter, aware that he is in the presence of - what? the remarkable, the brilliant, the miraculous, the holy? Peter is scared. "Go away. Leave us alone." Whatever Peter is in the presence of, he knows that he should not be there, that close. Darkness cannot exist with the light and sinners cannot survive an encounter with God. "It's all right," Jesus reassures. "Come and work for me." Peter doesn't need a second invitation.

Like Isaiah, he is overcome with awe; he knows his sinfulness; and he accepts a commission.

Ultimately that commission will take him to martyrdom. But the road will be, like his nickname, a rocky one. What will confirm Peter's shaky faith is the meeting he has with the Risen Lord.

That Peter encountered the Risen Lord is proclaimed in our second reading. Paul is wanting to clarify misunderstandings and misconceptions about the resurrection which are confusing members of the young Church in Corinth. He reminds them of a statement of faith which he received from others and which therefore originates from very soon after the death of Jesus. It is the earliest written statement about Jesus' resurrection. Consequently it is one of the most important passages in the New Testament. I spent hours examining each word when I was a student of Fundamental Theology, and nothing is more fundamental, foundational to our Faith.

So within a few years of Jesus' death people were saying, or singing, because the heart of this proclamation has a rhythm to it which suggests it was used in liturgy, they were singing about Jesus risen from the dead. As we (say or) sing the proclamation of Faith, so in the early Church people may have been chanting "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried; Christ rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures and appeared to Peter. Two phrases of three parts; and each part corresponds to its twin. Christ died and was raised. That is, the same person who was crucified was the one who appeared. He died for our sins, as the prophets announced; and rose on the third day as ancient texts foretold. His burial is proof that he actually died. His appearance to Peter proof that he truly rose.

Paul then adds a list of other witnesses - "the twelve", not a mistake as he forgot what had happened to Judas, but a sign that 'the twelve' was thought of as an entity not a number. We hear of some such appearances in the Gospels. Then an appearance to James, the brother of the Lord who led the church of Jerusalem. We know nothing of this appearance; nor do we know anything of Jesus appearance to five hundred brothers. Since some of them have died Paul is saying some are still alive so, if you want, you can go and ask them about the experience. He is affirming the reality of the experience. Finally he speaks of the Lord's appearance to Paul himself; the experience that changed his life. All these appearances seem to involve a commission; an empowerment to act in the name of Christ.

The words Paul uses make it clear he does not think that these appearances were illusions. What people saw was the real Jesus; the same man who had lived among them had defeated death, was alive beyond the tomb and was offering that life to his followers. Like the vision of Isaiah and the experience of Peter this was something which changed lives and empowered people.

If we can believe the reports many people, more than you might think, claim that they have had a mystical experience which made them feel a sense of belonging to the universe, at oneness. When the response to such a claim is a change in the direction of their lives, an energetic working for good and probably for God, we can surely give reliance and credence to their testimony.