

Third Sunday of Easter

18 April 2021

Confirmation Mass, All Saints, Cheltenham



Today, the Third Sunday of Easter, in the Gospel (Luke 24:35-48) we meet the Risen Jesus appearing to His apostles, who immediately think they are seeing a ghost! It was true, the Lord had changed! He was inexplicably different, and much freer than He was. Yet it was plainly Jesus, His essence and His character, only now His passion and death were also incised into his body, as His wounds made clear. Everything was physical and touchable, but everything about Him was transformed and free!

Since the Resurrection had not wiped out the signs of His crucifixion, and He wanted to remove their disbelief, Jesus showed the apostles His hands and His feet. He even asked for something to eat, and was given a piece of what we'd call barbecued fish, which He took and ate in front of them (Lk 24:42-43). Thus He sought to convince them it was the same living body which they had seen and touched and felt; but at the same time that body glorified. St Gregory the Great (the pope who sent St Augustine to Ebbsfleet, and re-founded the church in England) wrote in one of his bible commentaries: 'the grilled fish is a pointer to Jesus' Passion', His suffering and wounds. 'Jesus had seen fit', Gregory goes on, 'to conceal himself like a fish in the teeming waters of the human race. He let himself be caught in a net of our death, and placed on the grill, symbolizing the cruelty He suffered at the moment of the Passion' (*Hom. in Evang.* xxiv.5). It is a bit of a startling image, Jesus as a barbecued fish; but it gets Gregory's point over: Jesus's wounds, like the marks from the hot grill, were now *part* of Him! They were for ever part of his glorified body.

There was probably a reason why St Luke highlighted Jesus's attempts to persuade the apostles that He was real by eating in front of them. From very early on *distortions* of the Gospel were circulating and the earliest Christian writers had to ensure that the *truth* about Jesus was being preached. One pagan attitude that was beginning to circulate was called Gnosticism. Gnostics were certain God was spirit, but they were so narrow in their views they also thought God was against matter and the body. As a result they could not accept the Incarnation of Christ. In response the Gospel writers insisted: no, the Son of God *became* flesh, and He *remained* flesh for all eternity. Interestingly St John who was the evangelist most concerned to stress Jesus's *divinity* was also the one most concerned to underline that Jesus's resurrected body was a *real* body; His wounds were *real* wounds.

Now, you might think that's interesting but not very relevant to your life: but that's not true! Our contemporaries are hopelessly confused about *God*, and therefore (unsurprisingly) increasingly confused about being *human*, and about the natural world in which we live. Transcendent values and reason, and the very meaning of Christian faith, are being undermined by a kind of virus that infects not only the truth of faith, but causes the rejection of reason and truth in themselves. Holding a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled fundamentalist. It seems that being 'tossed here and there, carried about by every

wind of doctrine' is the only attitude that people in our times can cope with, while our human egos and preferences and choices are becoming the measure of all things.

The gospels give a very different picture. *Jesus* is the measure of all things. In His words, His death, His resurrection, we can dependably discover the truth about of God, and the truth about our own life and salvation. In Jesus 'the Word *became* flesh'; and in Him the Word *remained* flesh after He had risen from the dead, linking forever the meaning of God and the meaning of mankind. In that flesh and blood and bone '*He* has made *God* known to *us*' (*exeghesato* Jn 1.18), and by the power of the sacraments at work in us, especially through our frequent sharing in the Eucharist, He calls *us* to make *Him* known to *the men and women of our own day*, and bring them the good news of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

There is an old legend in which it is said that Satan appeared to a saint claiming to be Jesus. The saint simply and cleverly asked Satan, 'Can you show me the marks of the nails?' Of course he could not! The wounds left by the nails, the thorns, the spear were the way the apostles recognized Christ. And that is also how our lowly bodies will be recognized, as having become by grace like Christ's (Phil 3.21): if we have hands, scared from giving; feet, wounded in service; hearts, pierced by the burning shafts of His divine love.