Homily – 5th Sunday of Easter (C)

*Acts 14: 21-27, Apoc. 21: 1-5 & Jn. 13: 31-35*

It might sound a little “heretical” to mention this, but back at Ampleforth during the vacation, one of my brethren made a very interesting observation in one of our daily homilies. The question he posed was as follows: *Why does it always seem so difficult to make our joy at the resurrection last for the 50 days of Eastertide?* I think he has a point, and it seemed to resonate with all of us. It doesn’t take too many weeks, it seems, before our “Alleluias” become a little limp and tired. It doesn’t take too many weeks for Easter to seem as if it were months ago, and yet Pentecost still seems a long way off.

In one sense, there is a fairly straightforward answer to this conundrum. Of all the aspects of the “Jesus story” recounted in the gospels, the Lord’s resurrection is – in some senses at least – the furthest away from our own personal experience. Anyone who has ever seen or held a new-born child can grasp the magic of Christmas, and so begin to understand what the Incarnation must mean. All of us have some experience of forgiveness or healing, so we have at least some handle, some existential interpretative framework, within which to grasp so much of Jesus’ public ministry. Sadly, all of us too have much experience of injustice, or of the suffering of the innocent, or the violence of tyrants and mobs – if not necessarily at first-hand, then all too commonly through our TV screens – and so the Passion narrative can speak to us in “real time”. All too have experience of death, whether that of those we love, or the awareness of our own coming end. We know the *buried* Jesus. But the *risen* Lord is *beyond* our direct experience – in a way, even beyond our imagining. That lack of personal experience does not, of course, mean it isn’t *the* central tenet of our faith. The Apostolic witness, the gospels and the early preaching of the Church are absolutely clear that the Resurrection *is* truly an historical event. Nonetheless, it really does demand our faith and our trust in a way which other gospel events do not, or do not to the same degree. And perhaps it is that “effort of faith”, that “faith seeking understanding”, which can blunt the edge off our Easter joy just a little.

In the light of all that, perhaps today’s readings come as something of a disappointment at first hearing. Again, they can seem just a little too distant from our experience to make much sense to us. We see Paul and Barnabas taking the ancient world by storm with their preaching, and the infant Church growing wildly. Yet our own experience seems to be of a Church in decline – falling numbers, ageing worshippers, a shortage of vocations. We hear the great vision of John in the Apocalypse, a vision promising new heavens and a new earth, a world without mourning or sadness. Yet our own world seems old and tired, still crucified by war and conflict, afflicted by the damage we ourselves are causing, still full of the mournful and the sad. And even Jesus’ own words, familiar as they are, seem to belong to the realm of mystery – especially when he speaks of his glorification. Even the least mysterious, the Lord’s “new” commandment to “love one another” can seem trivial, can seem to match that banal caricature of Christianity in our own time, that all we have to do is “be nice” to one another and everything will be OK.

Yet perhaps there is much in those readings which might rekindle our joy and deepen our faith. Think again of what we have heard. While Luke’s account of Paul and Barnabas’ mission is undoubtedly idealised to some extent, it is almost certainly based on solid fact. Luke’s contemporaries never attacked his account or sought to gainsay it, and there is considerable evidence – part written, part archaeological and part based on the “continuity” of the Churches that he mentions – which seems to verify his narrative. And it is a picture we still see today in “young” churches – in Africa, in Asia – a real explosion of the work of the Spirit and of the joy which he brings. We even see that same joy and enthusiasm amongst our young people – even in “old” churches; just think of World Youth Day, or visit our university Chaplaincies. The Spirit *is* still at work amongst us, and perhaps we too should remember with thanksgiving that God *has* opened the door of faith to the pagans – that is, to each one of us.

John’s vision, too, as we know, is just that – a vision, a promise. It has never been a description of current reality – but always a projection into the future of what Christ’s resurrection will bring into being in its fullness. That is, that the God who is our Creator, who shaped us to become his children, is still with us. He is still Emmanuel, God-with-us, at work within us to make *us* his new creation. For I think that, at its deepest level, John’s vision is not just about future cataclysm and the end of all visible reality – it is about *our* transformation, our re-creation, our *becoming* citizens of the new Jerusalem and the pains which bring that about. In a sense, I think one could legitimately paraphrase the whole of Revelation in those other words of St John: *My dear people, we are already the children of God – but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed to us; but when it is, we know that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*. And who could not take courage and hope from that?

As for the banality of the Lord’s “new commandment” – nothing could be further from the truth. For Jesus did not say to the Twelve: *Love one another*. Rather he says: *Love one another, as I have loved you*. And that is light-years away from “being nice”. That is the highest challenge that can be set, as anyone who has ever truly loved will know – whether as friend, or lover, or father or mother or even priest. That true love, modelled on the self-sacrificing love of Christ, is the challenge we are set day-by-day – a love that knows no bounds, a love for which nothing is too much to endure. And anyone who has ever tasted such love will know that, along with the pain of sacrifice and all the potential wounds which such a *vulnerable* love can bring, it is also the source of the very deepest joy – a joy beyond words, a joy which time cannot tire, a joy which will always find somewhere an “Alleluia” to sing.

As a postscript, it will not have escaped your notice that yesterday was St George’s Day. For many, many years, even after I joined the monastery, I always wondered why the risen Christ, depicted in art, was always shown carrying St George’s flag as a banner. It seemed so strange. Eventually, of course, it clicked. The Risen Saviour does not carry the flag of St George, it is George – as a martyr, as one who has followed Christ most closely in life and in death – who carries the banner of the Resurrection. That banner shows that the white field of the glory of Christ’s divine nature is now eternally marked by the blood-red cross of his Passion. That banner shows that the out-poured blood-red Cross is perpetually surrounded by the shining white glory of the Resurrection. The two parts – human and divine, passion and glory are indivisible; they make no sense, no pattern without each other. Perhaps that, too, can give us a little joy, a little smile on this morning of Easter. Each time this green and pleasant land flies its national flag – on churches and town halls, and even at the football – it is proclaiming the saving work of Christ, whether it knows it or not. And surely that must be worth a hearty Alleluia!

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23.4.16

Bidding Prayers: 5th Sunday of Easter

Intro: Fr Oswald

D: Let us pray for the Church throughout the world:

Let us ask God’s blessing on Francis our Pope, on Bernard our Bishop, and on all who bear the name of Christian, that we – like the Apostles – may be fearless preachers of the power of Christ’s saving work.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for those parts of the world which suffer conflict:

Let us ask God to transform the hearts of all, and especially of those who claim to fight for religion, giving them a clearer view of his mercy and compassion. May all come to recognise our common fellowship in God’s creative love, and so learn the ways of peace.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all in special need:

We pray for exiles and refugees, especially those trapped in political conflict both at home and abroad. We pray for the unemployed and the poor in our own land, and especially for the increasing number of homeless in our city. We pray for the elderly, the sick and the dying, and for all those who care for them.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for our community here at St Benet’s:

Let us pray for the Master and Betty, and for all those who teach here. Let us pray for all our students, especially those preparing for exams. Let us pray for all who serve us here, in whatever role they play, and for all those who find here a tranquil place for worship. May God fill our hearts with wisdom, and with that love which Christ commands.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us ask Mary, Mother of the Risen Saviour and Help of Christians, to join her prayers to ours as we say: *Hail Mary..*.