



Easter Sunday – 31 March 2024: Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

***“He saw and he believed”*** (John 20)

This week the Tablet Journal in its weekly online edition records Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, reflecting on the “loneliness of Jesus in Gethsemane” as Palestinian Christians conducted traditional Palm Sunday festivities with almost no pilgrims or tourists present on the route into the city from Bethphage. He told attendees, however, that he saw *“something very beautiful today – your Christian unity.”* He also praised the *“incredible testimony of faith”* of Christians sheltering in the Holy Family Parish in Gaza.... George Antone, a Caritas Jerusalem employee sheltering in the parish compound with his family, describes the desperation and resolve of the 600 people there, determined not to abandon their home. They ask: *“If we go, who will show Jesus to the people of Gaza?”* I found this very moving. I reflected both on our participation in Eucharistic Adoration after the Last Supper Mass in imitation of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and his question to his disciples *“could you not watch one hour with me?”* And the amazing bravery of people in Holy Family Parish Gaza who are prepared to stay there in great danger to show Jesus to the people of Gaza. The Easter Sunday Gospel challenges us to consider the depth of our belief in the Resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate, and the Scripture passages as a whole for this Sunday challenge us to reflect on our witness to this central truth of Catholic Faith.

The commentary in the Scriptures in Sunday Connection published by Loyola Press points out “Each of the four Gospels tells us that Jesus' empty tomb was first discovered by women. This is notable because in first-century Jewish society women could not serve as legal witnesses. In the case of John's Gospel, the only woman attending the tomb is Mary of Magdala. Unlike the Synoptic accounts, John's Gospel does not describe an appearance of angels at the tomb. Instead, Mary is simply said to have observed that the stone that had sealed the tomb had been moved, and she runs to alert Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. Her statement to them is telling. She assumes that Jesus' body has been removed, perhaps stolen. She does not consider that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Simon Peter and the beloved disciple race to the tomb, presumably to verify Mary's report. The beloved disciple arrives first but does not enter the tomb until after Simon Peter. This detail paints a vivid picture, as does the detail provided about the burial cloths. Some scholars believe that the presence of the burial cloths in the tomb offers evidence to the listener that Jesus' body had not been stolen (it is understood that grave robbers would have taken the burial cloths together with the body).

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The Gospel passage concludes, however, that even having seen the empty tomb and the burial cloths, the disciples do not yet understand about the Resurrection. In the passage that follows, Mary of Magdala meets Jesus but mistakes him for the gardener. In the weeks ahead, the Gospel readings from our liturgy will show us how the disciples came to believe in Jesus' Resurrection through his appearances to them. Our Easter faith is based on their witness to both the empty tomb and their continuing relationship with Jesus—in his appearances and in his gift of the Holy Spirit.”

St Paul says in the well known passage of Scripture I Corinthians 15: 14: *“If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain”. “Because of this dependence of our faith on the resurrection, the apostles are at pains to show us that Jesus truly rose from the dead and that He plainly showed himself to them and to many others after the resurrection”* says Joseph Pollard in his commentary in ‘Finding Fresh Light’. He concludes *“the Gospels presentation of the resurrection is very deliberate. It wants to assure us that our faith does not rest on fiction – nor on faith alone – but on fact.”*

St John tells us directly in the Gospel for Easter Sunday that following Peter into the empty tomb: *“he saw and he believed. Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”*

In Acts 10 the first reading on Easter Sunday, St Peter who out of fear had denied Jesus at the moment of His being condemned to death, bears witness to the Jesus risen from the dead *“three days afterwards God raised Him to life and allowed Him to be seen....by certain witnesses – we have eaten and drunk with him after His resurrection from the dead – and He has ordered us to proclaim this to His people.”*

Peter and Paul were ready to give their lives for this: to proclaim the truth that has changed our lives just as it has changed the lives of people in Holy Family Parish in Gaza. We celebrate the Resurrection in a special Sequence on Easter Day: a composition of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century *“Victimae Paschali Laudes, immolent Christiani”* let Christians offer sacrificial praises to the Passover victim. It is an ancient expression of the Church’s worship, and has remained an official element of the Easter Liturgies since its composition.

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A preacher has said we are not spectators alone but participants on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, so we have to become one with the "*Victimae Paschali*". Elizabeth Jennings an English poet and fervent Catholic, composed a Prayer for Holy Week: "Love me in my willingness to suffer" the opening verse runs like thus:

**Love me in my willingness to suffer**

**Love me in the gifts I wish to offer**

**Teach me how you love and have to die**

**And I will try**

The coming weeks of Eastertide give us a welcome opportunity to meditate further on the Resurrection of Jesus and our witness to it.

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