

## Homilies for Easter

This collection includes some homilies given at the Easter Vigil Service and on Easter Sunday itself. Once the Season of Easter gets underway the Sunday Readings take on a particular pattern.

Unlike the rest of the year, when our First Reading comes from the Old Testament, during Easter we hear various extracts from the unfolding story of the Early Church in the second part of St Luke's New Testament writings, the Acts of the Apostles. We then have extracts in our Second Reading from one of the other books of the New Testament. In Year C the Readings come from the Book of the Apocalypse – the last, and the strangest book in the New Testament collection. It was written for a group of persecuted Christians who are being encouraged not to lose heart, hope will prevail. Once we have been given a selection of the Easter Appearances in the Gospels of the first three Sundays, we turn our attention to the Gospel of St John, a gospel especially written from the perspective of the Easter Event.

## Holy Thursday 2016

Our Readings tonight help us make the connections between the past, the present and the future. In the remote past is the Jewish Passover described in our First Reading. This is the Old Covenant celebrating the events of liberation from slavery of the Jewish people from Egypt. Describing a past event, which continues into the present in our rituals, St Paul writes about the key celebration of the New Covenant – the Eucharist – which centres on the liberation from sinfulness and death of all people through Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection.

The New is rooted in the Old, but it also points to the continuing present – a present in which we give thanks to God for all God does for us in Jesus, and then to go out from our celebration to try to live its message in the rest of our lives. This message is about both thanksgiving and service, and it is the call to service that is highlighted in our Gospel. As Jesus says at the end of that reading, "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you."

Tonight all of these elements come together. We celebrate this especially solemn commemoration of the Last Supper in our Eucharist this evening. We give thanks for this incredible gift of Jesus' own Body and Blood to sustain us on our journey through life. We remind ourselves of the call to service, the call of each of us to serve the needs of one another in the ritual that I am going to invite all of you to engage in now. We come forward to wash each other's hands in the vessel, the font, we normally use for Baptism. In and through our baptism at this very font we are all called to that priesthood which is imitation of Jesus' own life of sacrifice, of prayer and of service to others. We also pray this evening for those called to the priesthood of the ordained ministry and its call to leadership by example.

Part of one great Communion of Saints we help each other as we journey towards the fullness of God's Kingdom.

## **Holy Thursday 2019**

Imagine, if you will, that instead of the versions of events of the Last Supper described by St Paul (and the writers of the first three Gospels) the Christian Community had chosen that of St John's Gospel, that we have just heard, as the basis of their weekly (daily) Eucharistic practice. In commemoration of the Last Supper rather than meet to break bread together the community would come together to wash each other's feet – every week, in some cases every day. I wonder how that would have caught on as a regular ritual. There is little lower in the hierarchy of household slaves in Jesus' time than that of the slave deputed to wash the feet of those returning from an outing. It was the lowest of the low.

On this occasion of celebrating the Last Supper the instruction in the Missal to the priest is that his homily should cover the whole of the mystery we celebrate in a very special way this evening. It is a very tall order. Indeed it is an impossible order to fulfil adequately in a few short minutes. Our Eucharist clearly takes over from the Jewish Passover Ritual that we heard described in our First Reading. It is a commemoration of the New Covenant initiated by Jesus at this Last Supper and by his Death and Resurrection. We also celebrate the fact that, however we may describe it in fancy philosophical terminology, that this is truly Jesus' Body and Blood that we are offered as food for our journey of faith.

It is all connected and not one aspect is more important to the exclusion any of the others. In fact, of course, on this night we are asked in our ritual to remember Jesus' actions as described by St John in a very vivid way. We are called on to realise that service of others is integral, is part and parcel, of what we are called to every time we celebrate the Mass.

Last week in the Vatican Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, hosted a reconciliation conference between the warring factions in one of the world's newest nations: South Sudan. Tens of thousands of people have been slaughtered in a civil war that has raged between different tribes and factions for years now. All the main players are avowed Christians. South Sudan came into existence as a Christian country separated from its Northern former rulers in Khartoum who are mainly Muslim. The president is a Presbyterian, the vice-president a Catholic.

At the end of the process which lasted a few days in the Pope's own residence, Francis came to address the two parties pleading for peace and reconciliation. This was not a publicity stunt. There were only one or two reporters present, and the few cameras around were in the wrong place to capture properly what happened next. Having given a very short address Pope Francis abandoned his lectern and walked in front of the President. He then knelt down and kissed his feet. When he moved on to the Vice-President the guy was so embarrassed that he tried to stop the Pope, but Pope Francis gently persisted (think again about the exchange between Jesus and Peter in tonight's Gospel). By the time he reached the third member of the government – a woman minister – she was in tears, as were many people in the room.

True symbolism speaks for itself. It does not need explanation. The Pope was dramatically putting into actions the words of pleading he had spoken. The action of Jesus at this Last Supper is equally symbolic of what we are called to every time we celebrate the Mass.

## **Good Friday 2016**

In any good drama many factors come together to produce its overall effect. There is the story itself, the setting, the dialogue, the way the dialogue is delivered by the actors, the way the actors are dressed, perhaps there are some sound effects, and then there is always the lighting. Darkness and light add their own effect to what we witness.

In St John's Gospel, after Jesus had washed the disciples feet, he sits back down at the table and starts talking about being betrayed. Peter professes his undying commitment to Jesus – only to be told that he will deny that he even knew Jesus in a few hours time. Judas then departs to do what he must do – betray his friend. Then, St John tells us, "Night had fallen." It is put as simply as that, "Night had fallen." Now in the dark evil deeds are done. Jesus is betrayed, arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, brought to trial before the Jewish Council, mocked and abused, and betrayed by Peter himself and finally he is taken to Pilate.

St John tells us at this point, "It was now morning." Light is emerging once again. Now, in St John's account of what happened to Jesus in many ways it is Jesus who takes the lead – getting the better of Pilate in that exchange; mockingly dressed up as a king when, of course that is exactly what he is; carrying his cross unaided by anyone else to Calvary; making sure that his mother is taken care of; and dying very simply by saying, "It is accomplished."

Although the other gospel accounts talk of there being "darkness over the whole land from the sixth to the ninth hour" during the execution, and thunder and lightning to accompany his death, John has all of this happen in the full light of day. For Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the dramatic effect of darkness accompanies Jesus' agony and death. For John it is already the light of hope beginning to triumph over the darkness of arrest, betrayal and mockery.

Darkness is not just witnessed in the events we celebrate in our liturgies over these days, it is seen in our world still today: in a Metro station in Brussels called Maalbeek on Tuesday morning and at Zaventem Airport. We were reminded yesterday of the darkness that was Bosnia 20 years ago with the conviction of Radovan Karadzic for crimes against humanity at The Hague. In truth, there are people living every day with such darkness in places like Syria, Iraq, the Sudan, Nigeria, and so on. Closer to home people live in the darkness of poverty and despair all around us. These are all the people who today desperately need the light of hope and redemption of the Cross to come into their lives.

In a few moments we will turn in our Bidding Prayers to pray for them, and for all our needs on this great day. They are the traditional ones in the Missal, but behind them are our thoughts and prayers for all in need of hope, healing and light today. Then we will come to venerate the Cross. This is an act not only of adoration and thanksgiving on our part. It is that, of course. It is also a call not just to gaze up at Jesus on the cross, but also to look upon those being crucified in so many different ways around us today – to pray for them and for healing, light and hope for all who live in dark places today.

### **Good Friday 2019**

One of the iconic images from the devastating fire at Notre Dame earlier this week was the photograph taken by the first people to enter the West Door of the cathedral even as the fire was smouldering away. In the gloom with shards of glowing wood splinters cascading from the still burning roof the golden cross behind the main altar shone through for all to see. It was a photograph that appeared on just about every tv station and in every newspaper across the world.

In the midst of devastation all around here was a symbol of hope, of survival, of possible regeneration.

Such a symbol of hope shining through an otherwise hopeless situation is very much to the point in today's commemoration of Jesus' Passion and Death. Light shining through what would otherwise be a desperate darkness is a key theme of St John's account of Jesus' Passion and Death. The other Gospels all talk about how there was darkness over the whole land from the sixth to the ninth hour – from midday to three in the afternoon – as Jesus hung on the Cross. There is no hint of darkness whatsoever here in St John's account. After all, earlier in the Gospel Jesus described himself as "The Light of the World".

At the very beginning of his Gospel John had declared that "the Word was the true light", and that it was, "a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower." Here on the Cross is proof of this. The light that Jesus brings into the world cannot be extinguished by darkness, even the darkness of the hour of passion and death.

Just as the golden cross in Notre Dame shone through the smoke-filled, smouldering gloom of the still burning cathedral the other night, so whatever gloom might accompany suffering and death cannot overpower the Light of the World. Jesus' light is the light of all nations and of all peoples.

As John portrays these events, Jesus is very much in control even as he is being tried and condemned. He clearly gets the better both of the Jewish leaders and of Pilate in his dialogues with them. He is dressed up as a king and mocked, yet the irony is that he is indeed a king, but of a very different kind. There is no need for a Simon of Cyrene in John's account of the carrying of the Cross. Jesus is well able in spite of his weakened state to carry his own cross. Finally, there nailed to his "throne" he is able to offer his Mother and the Beloved Disciple to each other as support for their mutual journey after his death.

Whatever darkness may come into our own lives – tragedies of one kind or another; the break up of relationships; illness; the loss of a loved one; whatever it may be, just like that golden cross in the sanctuary of Notre Dame shining through the smoke and gloom, with the glowing embers falling from the ravaged roof, Jesus' Death on the Cross shines through whatever darkness may invade our own lives. It is the greatest symbol of hope for our world in spite of the evil that it embodies. Hope always triumphs over death and destruction in the person of Jesus.

## **The Easter Vigil**

### **Easter Vigil 2004**

From Creation to Fall, from Exodus out of Egypt to Entry into the Promised Land, From Exile in Babylon to Return to Jerusalem, From Darkness to Light – we have traced, and in places re-enacted, God's dealings with humankind reaching their climax in movement from the dark and despair of Jesus' Death on the Cross to the words of hope spoken to the women at the Empty Tomb. *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."*

The God of compassion and love **to** us – offering the same hope today.

We celebrate this and ask that same God of compassion and love to work **through** us as we now come to bless the Easter Water of Baptism and renew our Baptismal Promises.

When a child is brought for Baptism we're not being paranoid about God not loving this child unless it is baptised; nor are we commanding God to do something special to this child as if God does not work outside the sacramental economy of the Catholic Church. God is in all things and is the God of compassion and love to all people.

No, Baptism is a celebration of our awareness of God's gift to us in this child, this new life. It is a celebration of our awareness that in entering this world all human life needs God's help and support – the support that comes from sharing God's life.

In renewing our **own** Baptismal Promises as adults we renew our own awareness of God's life in us.

The God of compassion and love **to** me and **through** me.

### Easter Vigil 2010

For much of the time I suspect the focus of our faith is on God and me. At times the focus widens to include family and parish, but usually it remains much of the time on that narrow God and me setting. This is understandable since faith is an intensely personal matter. It is about our relationship, our personal relationship with God in Christ. However, while deeply personal faith is not a private matter. Our very public attendance at services like this is an indication of this fact.

Tonight in our liturgy we are invited to widen the focus of our faith to its absolute fullest. Our faith, our Easter faith in the Risen Lord is not just about God and me, it is about God and Everything. All of creation from beginning to end, everyone who **has** ever lived and who **will** ever live is affected by this great event. What God has done in Jesus on the Cross and in being raised to New Life affects everything.

Let me just hone in on two ways in which this is shown in our liturgy tonight.

The first is our Paschal Candle – and the symbolic markings on it. From top to bottom, Alpha and Omega – the first and last letters of the Greek Alphabet – the beginning and the end – everything and everyone is included in this event. Right at the centre is the Cross which we believe is the central event of the whole of history – an event which took place on a very specific date and which happened to a very real human person – signified by the 5 brass studs which are placed on the Cross to represent the five wounds of Jesus. We celebrate Easter here and now and so every year a new Candle is prepared with the current date on it 2010. Easter is for all time and it is for now.

A second pointer to how what we celebrate encompasses everything is seen in our Liturgy of the Word and in the Liturgy of Baptism which we will shortly begin. We started with Creation itself – the Beginning. We celebrated the History of the People of Israel right down to Jesus; Death and Resurrection – that was our Liturgy of the Word. Now we will bless the Easter Baptismal Water – invoking the names of saints down through the ages from all over the world, and from this part of the world – Aidan, Cuthbert, Bede, John Boste. And, having blessed the water, we will renew our own baptismal vows and be blessed with the water of Baptism.

This feast is for now, it is for all time, it is for me and you, and it is for all people everywhere.

## **Easter Vigil 2016**

“...this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them.” I love that sentence in tonight’s Gospel. It speaks both of the patronising way in which the testimony of women was treated (both in Jesus’ time and down through the centuries), and of the enormity of what they were saying. How could it be true?

One of the ancient titles given to Mary of Magdala was “Apostola apostolorum” – “The Apostle of the Apostles”. It was she who is first entrusted with the message for the other apostles of the Resurrection, and the first to meet the Risen Christ (as we will hear in tomorrow morning’s Gospel). From the outset the Christian message was meant to be something entirely shocking, radical and new – an impossible idea witnessed to first by women – but as time went on, and Christianity became conventional, run-of-the-mill, the message lost its initial shocking impact, and women messengers were once again put in their place.

Each year when we come to celebrate this Vigil we are invited to return to the roots of our Christian Faith and be renewed in our understanding of, and commitment to, its central message of hope in the midst of devastation and despair. We listen to those readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, telling us that from the very beginning what God created God saw as good, and even when, time after time, that part of creation which was made in God’s own image and likeness – the human person – failed to live up to God’s promises, nevertheless God came to the rescue of humankind, without fail. God freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, brought them out of Exile in Babylon when they failed once again, and now God brings about the ultimate triumph, the ultimate freedom of all people from sin and death in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

In spite of doubts and wobbles that always come our way as we journey through life – tempted perhaps to think like those apostles “this story seemed pure nonsense” – we gather around the Easter Candle, the Lectern and the Altar tonight to renew our faith, and to pray that God may sustain and strengthen it into the coming year.

## **Easter Vigil 2019**

Perhaps you have noticed a subtle change in wording in our liturgy tonight, contrasting with that of Holy Thursday and Good Friday. On those days we are told that, “Jesus got up from the table” and washed the feet of his disciples, and that “Jesus carried his cross to Calvary”. Tonight we are addressed as, “Dear friends in Christ”. We mark the Paschal Candle saying, “Christ yesterday and today. The Alpha and Omega.” There are, of course references to “the Lord Jesus Christ” and this helps make it quite clear that we are dealing with one person but a change in signalled in our liturgy tonight.

At home in Nazareth we know that Jesus was known as the son of Mary and Joseph – probably referred to as “Jesus bar Joseph”. We are reminded, then, that “Christ” is not Jesus’ surname, rather it is his title. Jesus is “the Anointed One”, “the Messiah”. Strictly speaking the name ‘Jesus’ refers to the person born in a stable in Bethlehem, who was raised in Nazareth, who engaged in a healing and preaching ministry that led to his death on Calvary. ‘Christ’ is the name we give to the one raised from the dead, and whom St John and St Paul in their writings refer to as existing from the beginning, as well as being raised from the dead.

We are dealing with one, single person but a person whose existence surpasses the constraints of a particular time and place, like ourselves. In a recent book on our Christian spirituality the author describes things in this way, "Christ is the blueprint. Jesus is the map."

The overall plan of God, from the beginning, as we have heard in our Readings this evening, was that Christ, with him at the moment of Creation, should come in Jesus to show us how to live and to die, ultimately to be raised like him to new life and with a final destiny beyond our human life span. We call this "eternal life". The way in which Jesus lived – both the manner of his living and what he did in his healing ministry – is our map, setting out how it is that we too are to arrive at the same place as Jesus: to be raised to the new life of the Resurrection.

This is the faith we reaffirm at Easter as we come now to renew our Baptismal Promises: our rejection of evil that leads only to death and destruction, and our affirmation that in our Christian faith we find the source and the means to attain true life: Christ the blueprint; Jesus the map.

## **The Mass of Easter Day**

### **Easter Sunday 2004**

In receiving an email recently from a priest friend of mine in Sydney, I was reminded of a problem that people have in celebrating Easter in Australia/Southern Hemisphere. Whereas we are in spring time and towards summer, they are in autumn and moving into winter. The symbolism of New Life isn't at work for them in the same way that it is for us.

Everywhere we look there are signs of new life around us. The days are getting lighter and longer. Spring flowers are out, buds are on the trees and so on. We connect this new life with the hope promised us in Jesus' rising from the dead, and on Easter Sunday each year we are invited to renew our Baptismal promises. Baptism is our entry into the new life of Easter and whilst it is done once and for all – being reminded of that new life is important.

You know when we bring a child along for Baptism it is not that we are superstitious, or have a picture of a God who refuses to love anyone who is not brought within the sacramental economy/system of the Church. God is the God of compassion and love to everyone God has created – baptised or not, Catholic or not. We do not somehow **command** God to give new life to this child. God is love itself.

No, Baptism is a celebration of God's gift of life to us – especially in the gift of a new child. It is a realisation that all human beings are called to share in God's life.

In Jesus' death and resurrection God has shown that he is the God of compassion and love to us. God does the same in our Baptism and shows that He can be the same God of compassion and love **through** us.

In renewing our Baptismal Promises as adults we are being reminded of the fact that God lives in us, loves us and works through us as we respond to his love.

## Easter Sunday 2010

Last Wednesday a friend of mine set out to buy Easter Eggs for the altar servers in his parish only to find that the special offers that seemed to have been going on since Christmas were over. The commercial world has moved on, even before we have actually begun to celebrate what the Easter Eggs symbolize.

For us the celebration has only just begun and because it is so momentous the celebrations continue for nearly two months until Pentecost (far longer than we celebrate Christmas, which should tell us something about which is the most important event – not that the two can really be separated.)

The Risen Lord has brought about something in his Death on the Cross and in his rising to new life which has fundamentally changed everything from the beginning of time to the end. This is what we believe – God's saving and redeeming love for all people, of all times, in this one great act. No wonder we take our time celebrating this. It takes a long time for the significance of what we do to sink in.

The vastness of the significance of this event is symbolized throughout this Season by the prominent placement of the Paschal Candle right on the sanctuary – putting all that we do in its light. The symbols on the candle speak themselves of the enormity of what we celebrate

Alpha and Omega - this is for all time

The Cross at the heart

The studs representing the five wounds - this is real

The date 2010 - this is for now, today.

We are invited to celebrate this fact by renewing our baptismal promises – re-committing ourselves to our faith not just by our presence here, but in everything we do.

No wonder it is something we take our time over celebrating.

## Easter Sunday 2013

Something in common among the various accounts of what happened on the first Easter Morning is that people are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. It is, of course, a natural assumption to think that he will be in the tomb where he was laid to rest on Friday afternoon, but he isn't. In the Easter Vigil Gospel of last night the women who came to the tomb are even told by the young man they see there, *"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here, He is risen."* Peter and John make the same mistake as Mary Magdalen, but it is on entering the Empty Tomb that John *"saw and he believed"*.

We all have a tendency at times to look in the wrong places for answers to life's problems, for the things that we feel we have lost or are lacking in our life. The recovering addict knows this only too well – the next drug-fix, the next drink, the next big win, the next abusive relationship – that's where the answer lies. Only it isn't.

*"Why look for Jesus among the dead?"* None of us is going to find life among the dead. If all our faith consists in is simply living off what priests and catechists have told us in the past. If all it is about is fulfilling

rules and obligations, then we too are in danger of looking in the wrong place for answers. Our faith is something which is meant to be alive and active, something with which we engage and in which we reach out to others. This is what makes it alive and lively.

At Easter we surround ourselves with symbols of life – Light, Flowers and Water, which gives life and so on. It is in active engagement with our Faith that we, too, will find life and true hope.

And the best thing in all of this is that it doesn't take much to get us started, to find that spark which will give us faith and life.

In our Second Reading St. Paul likens it to a tiny piece of yeast which can be the leaven, the raising agent, for a large amount of dough. Just that little bit of new life in our faith will be enough not only to bring hope and life to our own lives, it offers the possibility of offering life and hope to others as well. We do this not by looking among the dead for life but any of these things which give life and hope.

### **Easter Sunday 2016**

“It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb.” The theme of darkness and light in our Gospel readings from St John over these last few days has really struck me this week. It was in the dark on the Thursday evening to Friday morning that Jesus is betrayed, arrested, denied, and mocked by the Jewish Council. The light of morning, however, already appears when Jesus is brought before Pilate – getting the better of Pilate in their dialogue, dressed as a king to be mocked, and yet truly being a king – a king who goes regally to his death in the light of day, according to St John.

Now we find Mary of Magdala journeying in the dark, but the light of dawn is approaching. This is a light not only signalling the start of a new day, but the dawning for her of the light of faith as she finds the tomb empty. In the other Gospels when she comes to the tomb we are told that a man dressed in white tells her, “Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here, he is risen.” She begins to emerge from the darkness of unbelief – a darkness which cannot bring life and hope for the future. Gradually faith and light will come and she will be able to bring the Good News to the apostles – the first one to do so – but first she must leave the dead behind her.

Too often we find ourselves looking among dead things hoping to find life – desperately searching for hope and meaning among all kinds of temporary distractions – for some it might be endless shopping trips, for others hours sat in front of the tv, the ipad, or the games console while whatever is on the screen just washes over our consciousness, for others the party scene in town every weekend – anything to help numb the emptiness of our life.

Routine, passive religion, where we simply come to have our cards marked as being present, fails to address the deep down need we all have for the light of the Resurrection to come into our lives. Many people in our society have rejected that particular dead-end kind of religion, but they have failed to find anything more meaningful with which to replace it.

For ourselves, we need to make sure that we are looking in the right places for life, not among dead-end things that offer no real hope. Instead we need to look into the Gospels, into a full and conscious participation in the liturgy, and into sharing the hope of its message with others by the way in which we live. This is why we have gathered once again this Easter morning and we are invited to renew our faith in the Risen Lord, and to pray that in looking among things that truly

bring light and life our lives may be filled with the hope and joy of this day, and that through people like us the world may come to know the light which Jesus' Resurrection can bring into all kinds of darkness.

### **Easter Sunday 2019**

"He saw and he believed." Having accompanied Jesus for nearly three years and having witnessed all that he did and said, still it took until this moment for the "Beloved Disciple", as he is called, to realise the enormity of what his Master had been telling his disciples all along. "Enormity" is not too strong a word to describe what we celebrate today. Nothing remains the same. In the light of Christ's Resurrection everything takes on a new perspective. We can truly look around us and see everything in a different way.

For most of us here our parents will have brought us along for Baptism as babes in arms. For others coming to Christian faith will have been a later process grounded in the example of a partner, the witness to faith given by a Catholic school on oneself or one's children, or even a realisation that something in life was missing, something which we came to realise is fulfilled in faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever our particular path to faith, today we are invited on this Feast, and in this liturgy "to see and believe" ourselves. Routinely, each week we reaffirm this by saying/praying the Apostle's Creed at our Sunday Mass. Today, however, we are invited to respond to the questions that were put to our parents and godparents at our baptism; then to be blessed with the water of Baptism, blessed last night at our Easter Vigil Service.

On every other Sunday during the year in our Gospel Reading we hear something that Jesus said or did, or at least where he was present in the story as an infant. We hear how he cured those who were sick; how he spoke out against the narrow-minded hypocrisy of the Scribes and the Pharisees; how he taught the crowds, and so on. Today, and only today, Jesus is himself absent from the Gospel – at least absent from the narrative of the Gospel.

For sure in our First Reading St Peter recounts for Cornelius the various things Jesus did in his lifetime, but St Paul and our Gospel are pointing to what happens after Jesus' death on the Cross. Here we are introduced to the Risen Christ.

We remember that Christ is not Jesus' surname, rather it is his title: The Anointed One, the Messiah. This Messiah, this Son of God, we are told by St Paul existed both before his birth in Bethlehem and lives still with the Father. We are talking about one person here, but describing two aspects of that one person: his earthly, historical life as Jesus of Nazareth; and the fact that he is God's own Son beyond any constraints of time and place: the Christ.

This might seem rather confusing but a Christian writer has recently suggested this way to approach this great mystery at the heart of our faith: to see Christ as the blueprint and Jesus as the map. In all that Jesus does and says, as well as how he goes about saying and doing these things, we have the map we need to chart our own path through life, following in his footsteps, following his example. Week by week in our Gospel Readings this picture is built up for us as we hear what Jesus did.

The overall blueprint, however, is a much bigger picture. It shows us how we fit in to a whole cosmos that is redeemed and brought to the new life of the Resurrection in Christ. This is not just about little old me. It is about everyone and everything. It is as huge as that. We are part of

something that goes way beyond our lives in Forest Hall on this Sunday in April 2019. We are part of an overall plan that God has for all humanity, for all time.

Jesus is our map on this journey; Christ is our blueprint giving us an insight into what we are part of on this journey of faith.

## **The Second Sunday of Easter**

### **The Second Sunday of Easter 2004**

There is an all too stark contrast between Jesus' Post-Resurrection greeting to his disciples and the stories making the headlines in the newspapers and on TV. *"Peace to you"*, seems a far cry from the situations we hear about not just in places like Iraq and Israel that make the headlines, but in other places like the Southern Sudan, Zaire, parts of Columbia and so on.

In this greeting, *"Peace to you"*, Jesus is saying that the promise he made to those disciples at the Last Supper a few days earlier, has now been fulfilled. It is a promise we repeat in prayer each time Mass is celebrated – *"Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give you."*

What Jesus is talking about here is much more than the rather narrow, trivial use of the word *"Peace"* in much contemporary rhetoric. For Jesus, Peace is much more than the absence of hostilities and warfare. It is also much more than what sometimes appears to be the meaning used by many political leaders which runs something like, *"The freedom for me, people like me, people that I represent, to live and to prosper without fear of interference by others."* The focus is on one group/nation/class of people/ religion – whatever. The fact that some group/nation/class of people/religion may - by its very life-style and way of being – be oppressing and doing violence to another group is usually ignored.

The peace Jesus is talking about is much broader than this. Peace is about harmony, good relationships across the whole spectrum – **within** ourselves between body, mind and spirit; between ourselves from the smallest friendship unit to relations between nations; and also a harmony with creation as a whole - ecology. The peace talked about by Jesus is a huge enterprise. It is something undermined the whole time by fear – fear and suspicion of the foreigner, fear and suspicion of someone holding a different set of beliefs; fear that I am not going to be able to hold on to what gives my life security, meaning and purpose.

The fears may have some substance to them or they may be completely imaginary. They need testing and they need to be confronted.

In his suffering and death on the Cross, Jesus has confronted and overcome the greatest of fears – suffering and death itself. That's why he can give that greeting *"Peace to you."* Fears can be confronted and overcome – that's why the symbol of the Cross is ultimately one of triumph – and although the enterprise of bringing about true peace is a huge one, it can begin – and it begins with me, with us. It begins with forgiveness – forgiveness of ourselves, of each other.

People complain that religion has been and is the cause of more violence and warfare than anything else down through history. It can seem to be a very powerful argument against religion and belief in God. Examined more closely, however, we find that it is usually a perversion of God's message that people use for their own benefit that is the cause of warfare and violence. The true message of Jesus' death and resurrection is one that leads to confronting our fears and prejudices, and that helps us promote the true peace which Jesus came to offer.

## **Second Sunday of Easter 2010**

Jesus' offering his wounds as a sign of identity, potentially somewhat gory the invitation both to the disciples and to Thomas is an important one. The fact that Jesus rises from the dead with the marks of the Crucifixion still on him attests to the reality of both the Crucifixion **and** the Resurrection. There is nothing unreal or even surreal about either. In Resurrection, Jesus is transformed but what went before is not forgotten. It too is transformed and remains part of who he is.

The same is true for ourselves, especially in the reconciliation, the forgiveness that the Risen Jesus gives as a gift to the disciples. In receiving forgiveness and reconciliation our past is not forgotten – insofar as there are wounds and scars from that past, they remain. They are part of who we are. But they **are** transformed. They are reminders to us of the power of God's redeeming love that accepts us just as we are – warts and all, if you like – and transforms our sinfulness in such a way that we can then share that forgiveness with others. Indeed we are commissioned just like those disciples in today's Gospel not to keep that reconciliation and forgiveness to ourselves but to share it with others.

The depth and power of this message of love and forgiveness is never lost, but it is damaged by some of things that go on in the Church – a Church which is meant to be the instrument of sharing the hope of this Resurrection in our world. But sometimes through its members, its clergy even, it fails. At the moment the Church is getting quite a beating in the press and the media over the scandal of abuse and cover-up in many different parts of the world. Much of that beating is justified, some is not.

Whatever has happened will never be forgotten but it can be transformed when in humility and contrition all of us who make up the Church acknowledge our weakness and failings and seek the reconciliation that God offers. The wounds and the scars of what has happened will remain as sobering reminders of the constant need for humility, but just like the wounds of the Body of the Risen Christ, they **can** be transformed and the whole Body then enabled to offer hope to others, as it is meant to do.

## **The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter 2004**

We are presented with two contrasting images of ministry in the early Church community in the Gospel and the First Reading. The image of the shepherd in the Gospel is about an already existing community led by, directed by, protected by, its pastoral leader – the shepherd. Contrast this with the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles – *“Speaking out boldly”* in dangerous in their attempt to bring new members to the community. Their preaching, their missionary work is more akin to the image of the fisherman that we find in the stories of Jesus calling his early disciples, *“Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”*

The subtle change from an emphasis on fisher/missionary images to more shepherd/caring for the existing flock is understandable. We see the contrast in the books of the New Testament as they are written – St. John's Gospel being one of the latest to be written.

Of course the two images need not be in opposition to each other – the missionary can take care of an existing flock, and a pastor can reach out to new people. But there is always a tension and a conflict over which has priority.

I was thinking about this in connection with the idea of twinning with a parish in Uganda. In the romantic imagination the Missioner goes out to preach and to make converts to the Christian faith. In fact, though this is an essential part of Fr. O'Halloran's work in Panyangara, he, along with his fellow workers, have to care for an existing community. The care is spiritual – prayer, sacraments, training and supporting catechists – but there is also physical care as well – bringing medical help, schooling, offering help with modern agricultural techniques and so on. Also very dangerous situations not far away from conflict in the Sudan and Lord's Resistance Army.

All this as part of a diocese with about half the number of Catholics as ours but with only 23 priests and 50 religious women and men – as opposed to 180 priests and about the same number of religious in our diocese. What might people here be able to offer work like that? Who might be willing to help – organise the help?

This brings us to our own situation and its priorities – missionary vs pastoral, caring for existing parishioners vs reaching out to people who have not yet heard the full Gospel message?

Clearly both have to happen but how, and who is to do it? At the moment as you know I have responsibility for Highfield, Chopwell and the Religious Education Centre for the diocese. At some stage it is perfectly possible that responsibility for a third parish will come this way. It has happened in the last few weeks with Whickham, Lobley Hill and Dunston. It's happened in Billingham. It has been the case for some time in parts of Northumberland.

Perhaps the more missionary/outreach work could be done by someone working in family ministry or youth ministry – but how would even the six parishes of our Pastoral Area cope with paying a salary? Discussions like this have been raised in the Pastoral Area Committee during the week.

When reflecting on our readings today we are being asked to reflect on the priorities for ministry in our parish communities and that involves to some degree the personal vocation of every one of us.

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter 2010**

Sheep are incredibly silly animals. Edging slowly through a flock blocking the road ahead suddenly a path seems to clear itself for the car to move on, but you daren't move on too quickly because you can be sure that one idiot sheep will just as suddenly dash across the road right in front of the advancing car.

It is not particularly flattering, then, to be compared to a flock of sheep in this imagery of the Good Shepherd. And yet, in our heart of hearts I think we all know that there have been times in our lives of incredible silliness on our part – and so, thank God for Jesus the Good Shepherd who takes care of his flock. There is something very comforting about this image of being cared for. *"I know them and they follow me... they will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from me."*

The ideal and standards of care for the flock set by Jesus set the bar at a very high level for the Church. When those standards are achieved by people in the Church – and they **are** indeed achieved by many people who are great examples of pastoral care both as clergy and lay people – the Church deservedly receives praise and a good press for what it stands for and does. When the standards set are not reached, however, and especially when they have been totally betrayed in the scandal of abuse now reaping a whirlwind across the Church in every part of the world – the Church, the hierarchy, all of us as church deservedly receive condemnation and ridicule.

We will be hearing of initiatives for prayerful repentance for what has happened and for guidance for the way ahead from our bishops over the next few weeks. But even if, please God, the highest standards of pastoral care and trust in what happens in the Church can be restored – pastoral care itself, is not enough. The image of the Good Shepherd is one of care for the flock that already exists. It's warm and has a nice feeling about it – but there is much more to the Gospel besides this.

The *"huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language"* that St. John sees in his vision in our Second Reading could only have been gathered in by missionaries like Paul and Barnabas in our First Reading. Such missionaries take the Good News of the Gospel to places where it is unknown, to people who have not really heard of Jesus and his message of salvation. Such people are not now just to be found in what we once chose to call *"Foreign Mission Lands"* in faraway countries. They are right here all around us in our own country, in this town. Those of you who have been to big gatherings – probably a funeral service – where people have come to pay their respects to someone who has died – you will know what I mean. People coming in genuine respect for, and solidarity with a grieving family – clearly finding being in church awkward, embarrassing, not knowing how to conduct themselves, not knowing the hymns, not even knowing the Our Father. We are in mission territory right here.

Today we mark Vocations Sunday – a day when we pray for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life – people who will be pastors and missionaries. But praying for other people to do the work is not enough. Each baptised Christian has a role to play in this – and apart from prayer, the most basic task is to be people who WELCOME others into the community and who are ENTHUSIASTIC about what lies at the heart of our faith – not an institution, an IT, but a person – JESUS CHRIST who offers salvation and hope for us all.

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter 2013**

When you turn on a computer app called Google Earth you begin with an image of the earth taken from a satellite. Gradually you zoom in to the place you are situated. First the continents become clearer, then international boundaries appear, then you zoom in on Britain, on the North of England, the numbers of the roads appear – the A1M, the A1231 and so on. As you get closer Washington Village (Oxclose) comes up in sharper detail – the Church is seen from above. For a while as you keep zooming in, the details become sharper but then after a certain point the picture becomes very fuzzy and blurred. You have come in too close.

If you are not familiar with computers perhaps you have had a similar experience using a magnifying glass to look at a picture. Again, as you zoom in, details become much clearer and sharper, but then when you move in too close, it all becomes very fuzzy and blurred. You see the dots that make up the picture rather than any details.

I use these examples to illustrate an important point about images used in our Christian Faith and in the Gospels. Images help us to put in sharper focus what it is we are about. They are very helpful up to a point, but then it is as if everything becomes blurred again, and we need a different image / a different perspective.

So, for example, the image of the disciples as fishermen. Discipleship, as this image shows, is about going out and evangelising – sharing the Good News with others, gathering them in. That's not just the work of a few missionaries amongst the disciples, it is a calling we all have to some degree.

But the image, like any other, only takes us so far before it becomes blurred at the edges. There is more to discipleship than being fishermen – people who share the Good News with others. As one writer noted, fish don't require much after-care once they have been caught – they are dead! We need other images.

So, now a new image comes into play about Sheep and Shepherds – caring for the flock that is gathered. Again, although pastoral care is particularly important for those disciples who also have roles of some kind of leadership in the community – caring for the well-being of others is for all, not just a few in the community and is expressed in different ways at different stages of life. At times focused mainly on family, or colleagues, at times on wider community, at times our care can be expressed very clearly by our actions, at other times our care consists mainly in the prayers we offer for others.

Some of the variety of roles and circumstances of discipleship in the Church are given in our Readings this weekend. Paul and Barnabas, missionaries and fishermen preaching the Crucified and Risen Christ welcomed or not in Antioch. In the Second Reading we hear of people who have witnessed to the Risen Christ throughout what is called "*The Great Persecution*" - people who have triumphed in the ultimate witness of martyrdom, and finally Christ, the Good Shepherd, offering the key model of pastoral care in the community.

Many different models, different ways of being, but all witnessing to the same person:- the Crucified and Risen One who gives hope and meaning to all our lives. Discipleship in all its varieties – a discipleship in which we all have a role to play.

## **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter 2004**

As you are aware for these Sundays of Easter our Second Readings have come from the final book of the Christian Scriptures – the last book in the Bible, the Book of the Apocalypse. Each week before listening to some quite bizarre-sounding visions, I've reminded people that this book was written as an encouragement to a small, beleaguered community of Christians, who were suffering persecution for their faith and whose lives were in danger because of being Christian. The visions of the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil are urging them to stay faithful – they too will triumph.

This is very much the image of today's extract about the New Heaven and the New Earth, "*God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death and no more mourning or sadness*". Don't worry, your troubles **will** come to an end.

There **are** Christians today in different parts of the world who suffer and are persecuted for their faith – in the Southern Sudan, in parts of Indonesia and so on – but for us the experience is pretty alien. This same Reading however, is offered as one of the choices available for a funeral Mass or liturgy. It's a very appropriate one for people who are grieving. "*Here God lives among his people. He will wipe away the tears from their eyes; there will be no more mourning or sadness.*"

Famously 150 years ago Karl Marx described all this religious stuff "*the opiate of the people*". Belief in things like this was like an anti-depressant drug that knocked the edge off the misery and appalling conditions of peasants and workers. Instead of taking responsibility for themselves, of rising up against the injustices they suffered, they were content with a make-believe world offering something better in the future.

Today the opiate of choice is no longer mainstream Christian religion – there are many DIY religions as well as a whole host of other things available – a fantasy world made up of wall-to-wall soap operas and so-called ‘*reality shows*’ for one; hard drugs offer another get out, and there are plenty of others.

As mainstream Christians, however, we do **not** take the hopes and dreams of our Readings as opiates or fantasies. We believe in their truth-claims, their **reality**. There **is** hope and salvation beyond this life, which is sometimes one of pain and suffering (as well as at times being fun and delightful). And our Christian faith does not encourage us to abdicate our responsibility for what happens in this life. Indeed, it does quite the opposite.

In the command to love one another in today’s Gospel, Jesus gives the foundation for taking responsibility for life here and now. This, he says, will be the mark of how it will be known that some people are his disciples – by the love they have for each other, for others. He demonstrated his love by dying on the Cross.

The first disciples were called to think all this through and to live it out as people living in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman Empire. **We** are called to do the same in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of instant, global news, of western wealth and comfort, of complex clashes of needs and values – but always with this same fundamental call to Love One Another and believing in the God who is faithful to the promises God has made about a New Heaven and a New Earth. They begin here and now.

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

#### **Fifth Sunday of Easter 2010**

The context in which Jesus says or does something is always important in coming to understand what he means both for those who originally were witnesses and for ourselves. One of the keys to understanding today’s extract is the opening phrase, *“When Judas had gone Jesus said”*.

This is the Last Supper and in St. John’s Gospel, what Jesus has done up to this point is to get up from the table, put a towel round his waist, take a bowl of water and go round washing the disciples’ feet, including the feet of Judas. He has taken on the role of the lowest slave in a household.

He sits back down at the table, tells them *“You call me Lord and Master and rightly, for so I am. If I, the Lord and Master do this for you, you must do the same for each other.”* This seems to be the final straw for Judas. Jesus tells them that one of them is going to betray him. John asks who it might be. *“One who dips his bread in the dish with me,”* says Jesus, just at the moment Judas does precisely that. *“Not I Lord, surely?”* but it is, and although the others don’t know what is going on, Jesus tells him, *“What you are to do, do quickly”*. Judas goes and we are told, in a kind of dramatic aside, *“Night had fallen”*. The powers of darkness are afoot.

Now, *“When Judas had gone Jesus said”*. These words about glorifying and loving one another are said in this context – Night and the actions of the most menial slave in the household who washes everyone’s feet. To anyone writing a fantasy, a great epic story of a super hero, light should be blazing on a scene like this. It should be about some great noble deed (like winning a dual) and the enemy should be destroyed.

But it isn’t.

It is black night. Jesus washes feet, even the feet of the betrayer. This is what true glory looks like, what true heroism looks like. This is what love looks like.

It is not for everyone and down through the ages even Christians have tried to downplay this rather stark and mundane image with military images of standards, swords and battles, with winners and losers. And that all right – up to a point.

As long as it does not take us away from this basic message of hope in this Gospel:-

It is at the darkest time that God's glory shines in Jesus, and in the most ordinary menial ways, is God's love made manifest. And when we do this, act on this,

***“By this love you have for one another,  
Everyone will know that you are my disciples”.***

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter 2013**

The full depth of meaning of that short passage comes to light when we remind ourselves of the context in which these words were spoken by Jesus. The setting is what we call the Last Supper and in St. John's account at the beginning, before they start their meal, Jesus has got up from the table, taken off his outer garment and gone round with a bowl of water and a towel and washed the feet of the disciples. You remember Peter objects to Jesus doing this but relents in the face of Jesus' response.

When he has finished this task of a **slave** he sits down again and tells the disciples that they should follow his example and do the same. He has also said that one of them is going to betray him. Although the others don't understand what is going on, Judas Iscariot has got up from the table and gone off into the night to do his dirty work.

And now comes our Gospel passage for today, *“When Judas had gone Jesus said...”* Notice, first of all, that even though it is night and the dark deal of betrayal is happening even as he speaks, Jesus talks about this as his time of *“Glory”*. Glory is an expression of the presence of God which nothing - the physical darkness of night, the metaphorical darkness of evil and betrayal – none of that can diminish the Glory of God – the presence of Jesus who, in this darkness, is the Light of the World. Although terrible things are still to come – the Light of the World cannot be overpowered.

Having given this message, this context of hope, Jesus addressed the disciples as, *“My little children”*. Children are often, and rightly, afraid of the dark, and what is about to happen. His arrest, his trial and his death on the Cross, are going to reduce them to little children – fleeing in fear, or denying that they had anything to do with him. *“I will not be with you much longer.”*

And now comes the new commandment *“Love one another, AS I HAVE LOVED YOU”*. That love goes as far as dying for them, for us, on the Cross. Already at this meal it has gone as far as washing the feet even of Judas Iscariot. Just pause here for a minute to realise what has gone on here. Jesus has taken on the role of a slave – doing the most menial task of washing dirty feet. He has done this to twelve men – one of whom will betray him to the authorities, another will deny he ever knew him, one will stay at the foot of the Cross, but the rest will have long since fled away in fear. Now, I'm not blaming the disciples for running off, I'm quite sure that I probably would have done the same. What I am marvelling at is Jesus' ability to continue, without a moment's hesitation, to love them and to wash their feet.

And now he tells them that behaving like this, as he has done tonight, and indeed the whole time he has been with them, will help people be aware of his continuing presence in the world. Following his example

will not only be a boost for the disciples, it will also help others to come to know what Jesus' message is about.

Even in the darkest of dark times – his example of love, whom lived by his disciples (by us) will show that evil will never triumph – love, life will always prevail.

## **The Sixth Sunday of Easter** **Sixth Sunday of Easter 2004**

We are almost at the end of the Season of Easter – Ascension Day and Pentecost are looming – and we're also almost at the end of our Readings from that very strange Book of the Apocalypse. The New Jerusalem – the goal and salvation of all Christian people and especially for the anxious, demoralised and persecuted group for whom this was written, is described in all its splendour. But it had one huge difference from any other major city on the face of the earth at that time – there was no Temple, no place of worship.

*"I saw that there was no temple in the city since the Lord God and the Lamb were themselves the temple."*

A Temple – like a Church – is a place of worship where people gather and can be helped to get in touch with God - but if God lives with them, there is no need of a Temple or a Church.

Churches, sacraments, priesthood etc. are necessary in this life because they help point up and point towards God's presence in our lives – beyond this life they are superfluous because we are then with God.

Sometimes when I meet people who are not regular churchgoers, they get all embarrassed and try to justify why it is that they are not regular attenders. I don't actually ask them about this, and it's certainly not me that they need to come to terms with on this. But one of the justifications you often get is that *"I don't believe you **have** to go to church to pray. I do it in all kinds of ways."* Well, fair enough – there's some truth in this, but it is not the only or most fruitful way of looking at things.

The other week I caught an episode of an American TV sitcom that I saw in the States three years ago. It was about a man **not** going to Mass when his wife and kids, his mother and father do. Confronted by his wife about why he didn't go, the reasons poured out, *"When I go I'm distracted. I'm thinking about my job. I feel as though I'm just going through the motions. I'm looking amongst the congregation and see someone sneeze and I think – I'm not going to offer them the Sign of Peace."* Then he gets the bit between his teeth *"Anyway I'm basically a good person. I try not to do anything wrong. I don't make fun of other people. I try to be nice. Why do I need to go to church?"* The response of the wife is cutting at this point, *"Well I'll tell you what. Next Sunday why don't you just stay around here and we'll get the rest of the church congregation come visit **you** since you're so good!"*

God **is** everywhere and in all things, and can be honoured and worshipped in all kinds of ways but unless we actually **do** the honouring and worshipping at **certain specific times** – we won't see the God present to us at **all** times (Sacramental Principle).

In the Gospel today Jesus talks about how the love of God and keeping of the commandments lead to the Father and Jesus

*"... we shall come to him and make our home with him."*

The closeness, the familiarity, the intimacy of this image of God's presence in our lives is striking. But like all relationships unless we give it some attention, some quality time, gradually it just withers away until one

day we just don't notice that we have become strangers and don't miss someone we thought central and essential in our lives.

God is present in all things and at all times, but unless we make the time and space to meet God at **some** particular time and in some particular space on a regular basis (church, prayer, scripture reading) we just won't notice that presence.

### Sixth Sunday of Easter 2010

There is an important traditional phrase which comes to mind in the light of our Readings this weekend and of the current political situation. It is this – *“As Christians we are **in** the world, but not **of** the world.”* What this means is that being **in the world** we have a direct interest in what goes on in the world around us – in politics, in all human affairs. At the same time not being **of the world** we can never be fully satisfied with things in **this** life. Our ultimate destiny lies elsewhere, but our means of getting there is here and now in this world.

The ultimate destiny of Christians is depicted by St. John in our Second Reading in one of the least disturbing of the visions in this Book of the Apocalypse. Written for a community of Christians undergoing terrible persecution he offers the hope of what he calls the New Jerusalem – a place where people can be secure and happy – at home with God and enjoying God's company face to face – without any distractions, beyond their current trials and tribulations.

In our Gospel Reading Jesus talks about a *“peace that the world cannot give”* – something that only God can give. Again, this reminds us that our ultimate destiny is not in this world. The fullness of the gift of peace lies in God, but it begins here. Jesus' words, his example of love, his gift of peace which has already begun at least – all point to the need for Christian involvement in the world here and now.

Whether it is about respect for life, working for justice and peace in this country, or justice and peace in the world as a whole, this is an integral part of our Christian calling. The Bishops writing about the Common Good in the run-up to the Election, the on-going work of St. Cuthbert's Care, our schools, CAFOD, Justice and Peace groups, the S.V.P., right-to-life groups, involvement of individuals in political parties – all of this is our being **in** this world.

They are all attempts in different ways to give expression to the core values that Jesus lived and told his followers to carry on doing – love, peace, respect and so on. Right from the beginning the early Christian people struggled with how to share this message of Jesus with others. So, in our First Reading we find the early Church struggling with what to do about pagans / gentiles who want to embrace the Gospel. Did they have to become Jews and observe all the Jewish laws? No, they didn't. This a tremendous breakthrough and a difficult one for this young community to face. But they are **in** the world and have to face the problems and issues that being involved in the world throws up in every generation.

What Jesus offers in this situation is help and guidance from someone he calls the Advocate – the Holy Spirit – leading and guiding us on the way. And if ever we needed that Spirit guiding the Church and the body politics in this country and elsewhere, it is now. Helping us to **be** in the world, to find a just and hopeful way forward, but also to realise that we have a destiny beyond this world.

## Sixth Sunday of Easter 2013

Since the 1960's many countries across the world have contributed troops to various United Nations Peace-Keeping Units as they have been needed at different times and in different places – Cyprus, Lebanon, Rwanda, the Congo and so on. These have been very dangerous postings because much of the time the warring factions just wanted to be at each other's throats. These were 'Peace Keeping' Forces and for many, peace has come to mean the absence of violence, but no more. To be sure the absence of violence would in itself be a welcome relief to people suffering in the middle of warfare, but it brings about only what we call an 'uneasy peace' – much more is needed for real peace to come about and it is this real, deeper meaning of peace which Jesus give to his disciples – and notice that he doesn't just **WISH** it for them, he **GIVES** them it.

When Jesus uses the word '*Peace*' in St. John's Gospel it is intimately connected with a number of other words, some of which are used in today's passage. Others occur at different points in the Gospel. I am thinking of words like Love, Light, Truth, Belief, and perhaps above all, LIFE. Taken together these words signify **HARMONY**:

- A harmony between ourselves and God;
- A harmony with *in* each of us;
- A harmony between ourselves and other human beings;
- A harmony between ourselves and the rest of creation.

This is a great deal more than a mere absence of hostilities.

**BUT** to repeat an earlier observation, Jesus does not merely wish peace for his disciples, he actually **GIVES** it. It is here and available already in all that Jesus does and says and offers us. It is a possibility for us but it has to be constantly worked at in God's grace.

I have a plaque in my sitting-room which reads "*Who looks outside dreams, who looks inside awakens*". The beginnings of peace and harmony in our lives live within – with being honest about our lives and how we are living them – the element of Truth which Jesus talks about.

Now, one of the dangers of looking within is to become obsessed with minor details of our failings which can grow out of all proportion in our consciousness and which can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Always we begin with the certain fact that God loves us and in that love God wants us to be all that we can be – our very best selves. So, in our honest assessment of our lives we hand our failings over to God's love and forgiveness and begin to feel the peace that he gives his disciples – a peace which can help bring harmony and peace to others as well.

So, when we pray for peace in our world, certainly we pray for an end to the violence and warfare which blights the lives of so many people, but we also pray for that deeper peace which begins within each one of us – and which is already present as Jesus' gift to his disciples.