



RETREAT

Monday 30 September 2024

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The Locked Room

John 20. 19 - 29

This morning we saw the disciples running around in the dark, searching for the Lord. The Beloved Disciple sees and believes. It is dawn. Now it is evening and we are back in the dark, and they are immobilised in the locked room.

The morning was dark at first because they had not yet found the Risen Lord. The evening is dark because they are not yet filled with the Holy Spirit, the living breath of the Risen Lord. Jesus has burst out of the empty tomb. They are still in the tomb of the locked room. Genesis says that in the beginning, 'the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life¹; and the man became a living being.' (2.7). Now Jesus gives them the breath of eternal life: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.' They share in his Risen Life and so they are ready to be sent to preach.

This morning we saw that the mission of the Synodal Church calls us to be like Mary Magdalene, the Beloved Disciple and Peter, those who search for the Risen Lord. So too we must be close to the searchers of our time. But we shall only become *preachers* of the Resurrection if we are alive in God. Now one will believe a zombie. Remember Irenaeus, *Gloria Dei, homo vivens*; the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Like Lazarus, we hear the voice of the Lord summoning us out of our locked rooms: 'Come out and live.'

Holiness is being alive in God. A cousin of Charles de Foucauld, who was much given to the pleasures of eating and drinking, describes a visit from Charles who returned to Paris for a short visit after years of living in the Sahara: 'He entered the room and peace entered with him. The glow of his eyes and especially that very humble smile had taken over his whole person....There was an incredible joy emanating from him...I, upon seeing that my whole sum of satisfactions did not weigh more than a tiny fraction in comparison with the complete happiness of the ascetic, found rising within me a strange feeling not of envy but of respect.²' It was said of St Teresa of Avila that 'she was rapturously conscious of a *life* beyond self³.' Or think of Carlo Acutis, a handsome Italian teenager who played video games. Millennials can see here one of their own generation who is truly alive. So the challenge for us is to help each other to breathe deeply the rejuvenating Holy Spirit! A bit of a challenge for me now in my eightieth year!

The first task of leadership is to lead the flock out of the tiny sheepfolds into the fresh air of the Holy Spirit. Leadership opens the locked doors of stuffy rooms. The disciples are imprisoned by fear. So let us think of the fears that may prevent us from becoming alive in God, and so preachers of the gospel of abundant life.

¹ Not here *Ruah* but neshama.

² Fergus FLEMING, *The Sword and the Cross* London 2003, p. 235f.

³ George ELIOT, *The Prelude to Middlemarch*, first published in 1871.

We all know the fear of being hurt. Some of us come to this Assembly nervous that we shall not find recognition and acceptance. Our treasured hopes for the Church may be scorned. We may feel invisible. Do we dare to speak and risk rejection? If you are not used to this world of the Vatican, with its grandiose titles and strange clothes, it can be intimidating. We dare to take the risk of getting hurt, because the Risen Lord is wounded. He shows them his hands and his side.

the Easter Preface goes further and proclaims, 'he lives forever slain'; '*sed semper vivit occisus*.' Remember those words of my brother Herbert McCabe: 'If you love, you will be hurt and even killed. If you do not love, you are dead already.' Becoming alive in God means being unafraid of wounds.

Our priory in Jerusalem is situated near the Damascus Gate. This is a tense place where the Old City opens onto the Arab quarter. A group of young Jews stood there, blindfolded, offering 'free hugs' to anyone who wanted one. Gratuitous love in the face of the gratuitous hate. They took the risk that instead of a hug they might receive a knife.

Alan Paton was a South African novelist who courageously campaigned against apartheid. One of his characters says: "When I shall ascend to heaven, which I certainly intend to do, the Big judge will say to me "Where are your wounds?" And if I say I haven't any, he will say "Was there nothing to fight for?"⁴

In the Philippines I met a woman who scarred by leprosy. For most of her life she lived in a leprosarium which was run by a branch of the Dominican Order, the brothers of St Martin. Many of them suffer from leprosy too. She was afraid to leave the place, even when she was cured. People would see her scars and be afraid, and so she remained trapped inside. And one day she dared to venture outside, and she discovered a new mission, to travel all over Asia, inviting people who suffered from leprosy to come out and live.

We can embrace the risk of being hurt because the Lord has given us his peace. The film *Des dieux et des hommes* tells the story of the Trappist monks who refused to flee Algeria when terrorist violence broke out in the 1990s. Frère Luc, the ancient doctor of the community, says "I'm not scared of death, I'm a free man." (*Je ne crains pas la mort, je suis un homme libre*). In the Old Dominican rite of the Mass, the priest kissed the chalice of Christ's shed blood before he offered the greeting of peace.

The first creation began with 'Let there be light.' The New Creation begins with 'Let there be peace.' These words cannot be unspoken. Mahatma Gandhi had a picture of Jesus in his room with the quotation from Ephesians 'He is our peace.' (2.14). Jesus is God's Sabbath. In the early Church, '*in pace*' was written on Christian tombs. We are baptised into Christ's peace which nothing can destroy. We need be afraid of nothing.

In the late sixties, my Dominican community in Oxford was attacked by a crazy group. Not the Jesuits! At 2am, two small bombs blew out all the windows in the front of the priory. We were all woken and rushed down. The police came and the ambulances. The Prior alone, Fergus Kerr, was still fast asleep. The youngest novice was sent to his room. 'Fergus, Fergus, wake up, there has been a bomb attack.' 'Anybody dead?' 'No'. 'Anyone wounded?' 'No.' 'Go away and let me sleep. We will think about it in the morning.' My first lesson in leadership.

The victory is won. When his executioners came for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his last message was for his friend Bishop Bell of Chichester was: 'Tell the bishop...our victory is certain.' One of

⁴ Alan PATON, *Ah, But your Land is Beautiful*, Vintage/Ebury, London, 2002, pp. 66-67.

the brethren may have a sex change, the bursar may run away with the money, the Church may be blown up! But Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again.

God's peace does not mean that we *feel* at peace. My fellow novice Simon Tugwell OP, wrote: 'It is not a subjective sensation of peace that is required; if we are in Christ, we can be in peace (*in pace*) and therefore unflustered even when we feel no peace.⁵' Perhaps for many of us, the most profound challenge is to be at peace with ourselves. Do we dare to look at our own troubled and divided hearts, the bits of ourselves that we do not like? The temptation is to project on to others what we fear and dislike in ourselves. Tugwell again: 'peace comes with an unflustered self-knowledge.....The way to peace is the acceptance of truth. Any bit of us that we refuse to accept will be our enemy, forcing us into defensive postures. And the discarded pieces of ourselves will rapidly find incarnation in those around us.'⁶

Our fierce love of the Church can also, paradoxically, make us narrow minded: the fear that it will be harmed by destructive reforms which undermine the traditions that we love. Or the fear that the Church will not become the wide-open home for which we long. It is deeply sad that often the Church is wounded by those who love the Church, but differently! St Ephraim said that the Catholic church is 'the big church with the big lap.'⁷ I met a German Lutheran theologian who taught at Oxford, and he said: 'I am afraid that Catholics are becoming Protestant.' Sometimes we forget the wideness of Catholicism, with its both/and. The truth we love is, as Bishop Robert Barron wrote, 'as wide the universe and as specific as the person of Jesus.'⁸ Perfect love drives out fear. Let it drive out the fear of those whose visions of the Church are different. The Church is in the hands of the Lord and God has promised that the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

During the Napoleonic era, A flustered Monsignor came anxiously to see the Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, and said, 'Your Eminence, the situation is very serious. Napoleon wishes to destroy the Church.' To which the Cardinal replied, 'Not even we have succeeded in doing that!'

Our very love of the Church, in utterly different ways, can us lock inside a narrow world, gazing at our ecclesiastical navels, watching others, ready to spot their deviations and denounce them. Pope Francis, before his election, said that the Lord would come knocking on the door and demanding to be let out of the sacristy! Of course, there are changes for which some of us long, but let that not lock us inside our little churchy world. We shall be boring! God is revealed on mountain tops with unbounded horizons and outside the camp.

Our liberation from these rooms needs not just courage, but God's healing forgiveness. The Risen Lord says, 'Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained.'

Sin locks us inside prisons of narcissism and party politics, like the eldest son who sulks and will not join in the party to welcome home his prodigal brother. Herbert McCabe again: 'Our very nature calls us to something new and frightening...We are the kind of being that finds its fulfilment, its happiness and flourishing only in giving itself up, and getting beyond itself. We need to lose our selves in love; that is what we fear. We are summoned to venture into what is unknown, to abandon what is familiar and safe, and set out on a journey or quest. .And yet we do not like to take risks. We settle for the person that we have achieved or constructed because

⁵ Simon TUGWELL OP, *Reflections on the Beatitudes*, Darton Longman and Todd, London 1980 p.114.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷ Quoted in S. TUGWELL "Scholarship, sanctity and spirituality", *Communio* 11/1 (1984), p. 53.

⁸ Michael HEHER, *The Lost Art of Walking on Water: Reimagining the Priesthood*, Mahwah, Paulist Press, 2004 p.132.

we are afraid of being made in the image of God. This failure to respond to the summons into life, this failure of faith, is called sin.⁹

So this synod is not a place for negotiations about structural change, but for choosing life, for conversion and forgiveness. The Lord summons us out of the small places in which we have taken refuge and in which we have imprisoned others. The hymn composed by Frederick Faber, the nineteenth century Oratorian, proclaims:

‘There is a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.’

Let us pray that Christ’s peace will melt the violence that dwells in our hearts and which crucified Our Lord. Dorothy Day asserted that ‘the big fight is against violence more than it is against atheism.’¹⁰ She said: ‘Christians, when they are seeking to defend their faith by arms, by force and violence, are like those who said to Our Lord, “Come down from the Cross. If you are the Son of God, save yourself.”’¹¹ So in this Synod, let us overcome all the violence in our hearts: violent thoughts and words. Our global culture cultivates a violent imagination. ‘By the age of 18, American teenagers will on average have witnessed on the media 200,000 acts of violence and 16,000 murders’¹². Often these are glamorised or treated as humorous. Violence is normalised and even seems harmless as one zaps demonic enemies in video games. This seemingly innocent entertainment nurtures a violent imagination which has no guilt in destruction because in the cyber world, nothing is real¹³.

The Body of Christ is disfigured by poisonous websites, filled with cruel accusation, caricature, and hatred. Anyone who exercises any form of leadership in the Church will have experienced this. I was accused as Master of the Order of having given permission to a provincial to live with his mistress, a nun, in a railway carriage!

Our violent world deprives so many of even the breath of life. The sin of racism, for example, literally stops people from breathing. ‘I can’t breathe’ were the last words of an African American, Eric Garner, repeated eleven times and recorded on the phones of onlookers while he was choked to death by the police on Staten Island, New York ten years ago. These words have become the rallying cry of African Americans, symbolic of their oppression. They were also the last words of Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist who was murdered in his country’s consulate in Turkey on October 2nd, 2018.¹⁴ Let us give each other breathing space, the oxygen of debate.

This indestructible peace does not mean that we live in perfect harmony. We are gathered in this Assembly because we do not. But no discord can destroy our peace in Christ for we are one in Him. Thomas Merton wrote in his *Asian Journal*, ‘We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.’¹⁵

But Thomas was out when Jesus appeared. Perhaps because *he* was unafraid? When Lazarus was ill, he declared that he was willing to go up to Jerusalem and die with Jesus (11.16). He is

⁹ Herbert MCCABE, *God Matters*, Continuum, London - New York, 2005, p. 94-95.

¹⁰ Dorothy DAY, *The Duty of Delight*, Marquette University, New York, 2008, p. 943.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 895.

¹² “Children, Violence and the Media”, A Report for Parents and Policy Makers Senate Committee on the Judiciary; Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Utah, Chairman of the Committee on the Judiciary Prepared by Majority Staff Senate Committee on the Judiciary September 14, 1999.

¹³ Timothy RADCLIFFE OP, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*, Bloomsbury, Londres, p. 197.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

¹⁵ Naomi BURTON et al. (eds), *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, New York, 1973, p.308

passionate about the truth: ‘I will never, ever, ever believe¹⁶’ unless I put my fingers in his wounds. And when he sees the Lord he makes his passionate confession: ‘My Lord and my God.’ This passionate disciple also invites us out of the small room.

‘My Lord and my God’. This is literally a theological statement: a word about God. The theme of this Assembly is a synodal Church on mission. The heart of this mission is to teach our doctrines. When Mary Magdalene is called by name, she replies ‘Rabbuni’, Teacher. In the last words of St Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out to teach all the nations. How are we to share our Christian teachings with a world hungry for meaning?

In the poor suburbs of Paris, young Catholics are asking to be taught the doctrines of the Church so that they can talk to their Muslim friends about what the Church teaches. There was a gathering earlier this year: “*Assume ta foi en banlieue.*” ‘Embrace your faith in the suburbs’¹⁷. The young are hungry for the rich meat of the Church’s teaching. ‘My Lord and my God’. They will not be satisfied if we just offer them Jesus who was a nice guy and wants us to be kind to each other.

Our society is afflicted by a profound prejudice against dogma. Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, summed this up in his Commencement speech at Stanford in 2005: ‘Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people’s thinking.’ He was, of course, merely repeating a stale dogma of our times and *not* thinking for himself.

G.K. Chesterton asserted: ‘there are only two kinds of people, those who accept dogmas and know it, and those who accept dogmas and don’t know it... Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broadminded.’¹⁸ Some dogmas of our time are indeed stuffy locked rooms without oxygen: relativism, all sorts of fundamentalism, materialistic, nationalistic, scientism, religious fundamentalism. They lock people in small fearful imaginations.

But the great teachings of our faith, our Creed in essence, unlock the doors of our hearts and minds. They push us beyond small answers, and propel us on the endless search for the one who is infinite love and the truth, who forever exceeds our grasp. When I was a young friar in the late sixties, and everything seemed to be falling apart, most of us remained in the Order because we glimpsed the radiant beauty of the Creed, the truth we do not possess but which possesses us. The young will be satisfied with nothing less.

How can we invite the people of our time to enter into the wide-open space of our faith? How, for example, can we touch their imagination with the glorious doctrine of the Trinity, the most down to earth and practical teaching there is? For this we need the help of theologians.

Theologians also do sometimes retreat into the locked room of academia for fear of conversation with the People of God. When I was studied in Paris as a young brother, I asked another Dominican what his doctorate was on. He replied, ‘My young brother (He was just a year older than me), I will not try to explain. You would not understand.’ Twenty years later I returned on visitation as Master of the Order, I saw him and said nothing!

¹⁶ Timothy L. FOX: “Jesus’ Resurrection Appearances,” 1 November 2019 :”
www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/jesus-resurrection-appearances

¹⁷ Arnaud BEVILAQUA, ‘The Great Awakening of young Catholics on the outskirts of Paris’, *La Croix International*, March 22, 2024.

¹⁸ G. K. CHESTERTON, “The Mercy of Mr. Arnold Bennett” *Fancies vs. Fads*, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1923: http://www.gkc.org.uk/gkc/books/Fancies_Versis_Fads.txt.

Of course, we need academic theologians – exegetes and philologists and historians – who keep us in what St Paul calls ‘the obedience of faith’ (Romans 1.5). Otherwise we shall use the Scriptures for our own purposes and not God’s. But this tough discipline of study is ultimately at the service of conversation with our contemporaries, so as to accompany them on the journey into the infinite mystery of the divine love.

The day after the last Assembly Pope Francis called for a theology which is in charitable conversation with people of other convictions. He quoted his words to the students of the Catholic University of Argentina: “Do not settle for a desk theology. Let your place of reflection be the frontiers. [...] Good theologians, like good pastors, also smell of the people and the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of men and women.¹⁹”. Good theology opens the doors of stuffy rooms. Like Thomas, it is passionate and unafraid. It embraces new ways of speaking, new languages. A Synodal Church on mission dares to teach boldly and humbly.

¹⁹ FRANCIS, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, November 1st 2023.