

Dear Friends,

Once it starts Eastertide, like Lent, always seem to me to go by far too quickly when I want it to continue. I dislike the return to "ordinary" time, though I realise I am being misled by that term. We are already at the 6th Sunday of Easter and looking towards Ascension Day and Pentecost, which marks the end of the season.

I would like to quote a passage from St. Augustine that I came across lately: 'Because there are these two periods of time - the one that now is, beset with the trials and troubles of this life, and the other yet to come, a life of everlasting serenity and joy - we are given two liturgical seasons, one before Easter and the other after. The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Eastertide which we are celebrating at present signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the first season with fasting and prayer; but now the fast is over and we devote the present season to praise. Such is the meaning of the *Alleluia* we sing.'

There is a paradox here, in that even when keeping Lent we cannot live in the time before Easter. Everything we are and everything do as Christians is always after Easter and in the light of Easter. When commemorating Holy Week, for instance, we remember the suffering and death of Christ, but we are not living through them now. In fact we only remember them because we believe that the Christ who suffered and died was raised again to new life. If it were not for the Resurrection Christ would be only another forgotten failed would-be Jewish Messiah among many others. It cannot be stressed too often how central and essential the Resurrection is to Christian faith. In holy communion what we receive is the body and blood of the risen Lord, not the crucified Christ. Although we remember how he suffered and experience various forms of suffering and distress ourselves in our lives here and now, because of the Resurrection our trajectory is always forward - looking, as St Augustine says, to the happiness that will be ours in the future. So we can live our lives not trapped in the past, but resolutely going on ahead in hope and confidence and faith. We will always, I imagine, be seesawing to and fro between our past and present and what we look for in the future, but that is our orientation - onwards and upwards.

Having said that what will give us faith and hope to carry on the journey is partly our memory of how God has dealt with us and with his people in the past. We have, for example, been reading during Eastertide from a history book, the Acts of the Apostles, which records how the first followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit they received at Pentecost, were able to spread the new faith far and wide - and certainly encounter many hardships and difficulties, much opposition, in doing so.

I was looking forward last year to going to see the famous Passion Play at Oberammergau in Bavaria. The people of this small village have been presenting the play every ten years since 1634 in thanksgiving for their delivery from the ravages of bubonic plague. Because of the Corona virus it could not take place in 2020, so has been deferred until next year. During the

Middle Ages people delighted in putting on plays made from Biblical stories, from the Creation onwards and culminating in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. They are often known as Mystery Plays, so in this country we have the cycles of mysteries of York, Chester and Coventry.

I had not known anyone think of making a play from the book of Acts, however, until a few years ago somebody I knew did precisely that and put on his play drawn from Acts, which I sent to see at a church near Waterloo. Watching it one could see why no-one had thought of doing this before. Although the story has many dramatic moments, it does not lend itself easily to being presented in the form of a play. In this version the actors seemed to do a lot of shouting and it became very repetitive because of a regular pattern that emerges. Once Paul and his companions begin their missionary journeys something similar happens time and again. They come to a new place, go first to the synagogue (the local Jewish people are their natural constituency), speak there and find that some are open to the new ways and want to know more. Sooner or later opposition, often quite fierce opposition, gets up and Paul and his friends are forced to move on. They come to a new place, go first to the synagogue ... etc. etc.

The play had rather too many of these episodes. But then it is in the nature of our human life that we do go round and round in circles, repeating the same patterns of behaviour over and over, meeting the same situations with their problems and their joys. This is why, I think, it is so important that we do keep ourselves firmly rooted in our faith in the resurrection, because it is this that assures us that we are not going round in circles, but are moving in a hope-filled forward direction, never quite losing sight entirely what we have been, but trusting in God to lead us onward, ever closer to the heart of his love for us and all people.

Like the apostles it is the presence in us and with us of God's Holy Spirit which will be our anchor and our guide. Peter was clear, as we hear on this Sunday, that God does not have favourites, but lavishes his Spirit on all alike: pagans, Gentiles, everyone is included within the loving embrace of God. Our task now as the Church is to remain by the power of the Spirit in Christ the risen Lord, to hold fast to the love God shows us in him, to live in that love, and to show it to others.

The first letter of St. John puts it like this:

*Let us love one another,
since love comes from God,
and everyone who loves is begotten by God and know God.
This is the love I mean:
not our love for God,
but God's love for us when he sent his Son
to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away.*

Wishing you every blessing in this week of Eastertide,

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P.S. We do often hear in church the final part of the book of Acts, chapters 27 and 28, with the account of the shipwreck that landed Paul on the island of Malta. Apart from anything else it is an exciting story, so do have a read of it.