

Homily for Easter Day 2009

The word which we use in the English-speaking world to name the feast of the Resurrection of the Lord, Easter, has an uncertain origin. Some people say that it comes from the name of an ancient Germanic goddess whose spring festival was replaced by the Christian Feast of the Resurrection, but others are not so sure. One thing that is certain, however, is that the word we use, Easter, gives a name to the feast but does not in itself describe what the feast is about. This is very different in other languages. Some of which call this Feast "The Great Day" or "The Taking of the Meat", but most common of all are names derived from the Greek and Latin Pascha which is found in all the romance languages, in Celtic languages, and in many Scandinavian ones too. In all these case the name of this feast has derived, through Latin, from the Hebrew word Pesach, which we translate as Passover. So while we are celebrating Easter, in most other language groups today they are celebrating something more or less described as Passover.

This is not just a matter of words; words are important. We are celebrating Easter, and we read in St. Paul that 'Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us'; in other countries they are celebrating Pascha and they read that 'Christ our Pascha has been sacrificed for us'. Our English word Easter means that there is a real danger we will forget that this feast is the Christian Passover, a danger that is not present elsewhere. And this in turn is important because there is a risk we will only see half the picture. We are right to be full of joy at Easter, celebrating the resurrection of Christ, but that joy only makes sense if it is kept together with its sacrificial aspect. Passover is a sacrificial feast. The joy of Easter alone is not enough; we are not celebrating Jesus overcoming a sad but natural death, we are celebrating his triumph over a cruel and brutal execution. Our joy and wonder at Christ's rising from the dead cannot be disentangled from his sacrificial death on the cross. Easter Day loses its power if it is not read together with Good Friday. Unless we have shared the desolation, the emptiness and the grief of the disciples on Good Friday we cannot hope to appreciate the full joy they felt on Easter Day. We can only fully appreciate the recovery of something if we had truly felt its loss. We can only appreciate the full wonder of this day if we have allowed our hearts to feel the pain of knowing that Jesus, our greatest

treasure, willingly and voluntarily allowed himself to be captured, mocked and executed. The full message of Easter is not just wonder at the resurrection; it is wonder at the love of Jesus which drove him to offer himself freely so that all appeared lost, and then to be raised by the Father. Easter finds its deepest meaning when it is seen as Pascha, as sacrifice. In the Passover of the Hebrews an unknowing lamb was the unwitting sacrifice made to gain freedom from Egyptian slavery for the People of Israel; in Good Friday-Easter the lamb and the priest are one and the same person, and the victim knows exactly what is happening, to win freedom for all who want it, freedom from slavery to sin and selfishness.

This is more than just an academic discussion. An Easter faith is the defining feature of Christian life. What we do, how we live, what we say, who we are; all these things are defined by our faith in the Pascha. This is not simply a facile, cheap joy, a kind of all's well that ends well satisfaction; it is a deeply held belief that human beings are created by the Father's generosity, rescued from their own foolishness by Christ's generosity, and that written deeply into human nature is the truth that real achievement, real fulfilment, real happiness are found through giving of ourselves to and for others. Pascha tells us that generous and unselfish self-giving in union with Christ makes us citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, and as such we already have the beginnings of risen life within us. Pope John Paul once said:

"We do not pretend that life is all beauty. We are aware of darkness and sin, of poverty and pain. But we know Jesus has conquered sin and passed through his own pain to the glory of the Resurrection. And we live in the light of his Paschal Mystery - the mystery of his Death and Resurrection. "We are an Easter People and Alleluia is our song!". We are not looking for a shallow joy but rather a joy that comes from faith, that grows through unselfish love, that respects the "fundamental duty of love of neighbour, without which it would be unbecoming to speak of Joy". We realize that joy is demanding; it demands unselfishness; it demands a readiness to say with Mary: "Be it done unto me according to thy word"."

Angelus Address, Adelaide, Australia 30th November 1986

Risen life is life in all its fulness; the gateway to risen life is generosity and self-gift. For the first Christians the crucial thing was to be witnesses to the resurrection: those who had met the risen Christ now passionately wanted to tell others about it. They wanted to share the Paschal way of life, because they knew that in this they had found the key to human fulfilment. Nothing has changed since then. The key to real

happiness is found in Paschal living; that is, in fidelity to the simple truth, so easily overlooked by the materialist and the rationalist, that self-gift, not self-promotion, is the key to understanding human nature. This is to be the guiding principle in our daily lives. Lest we be tempted to dismiss this as so much talk that doesn't really make any practical difference, let me tell you about one man's journey back to God. The novelist A N Wilson wrote movingly in yesterday's Daily Mail about his rediscovery of his Christian faith. He explains how he dismissed Christianity years ago, left the church and mocked people of faith; but now all that has changed and he has turned back to God. This is what he writes:

"My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known - not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die.

The Easter story answers their questions about the spiritual aspects of humanity. It changes people's lives because it helps us understand that we, like Jesus, are born as spiritual beings.

Every inner prompting of conscience, every glimmering sense of beauty, every response we make to music, every experience we have of love - whether of physical love, sexual love, family love or the love of friends - and every experience of bereavement, reminds us of this fact about ourselves."

A N Wilson, Daily Mail, 11th April 2009

This Easter feast, this Pascha, invites us to make Good Friday-Easter the guiding principle for our lives; it invites us to be first and foremost witnesses to the Resurrection. In doing so, who knows, we may not only find our own fulfilment, but we may win others back to faith in the risen Lord.