

EASTER SUNDAY MORNING: 2010.

Acts 10:34-43; Luke John 20:1-9

Notes Acts 10:34-43

- This reading is set in the context of Peter's encounter with Cornelius. The significance of this is that it marks the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles.
- This reading represents the centre part of Luke's account of the encounter and its main focus is the proclamation of the story about Jesus.
- The whole section (10:23b-48) sets out the magnitude of the divine action.
- A key line for Luke is that of 10:34-35: *In truth I am grasping that God is no respecter of appearances. Rather in every nation the one who fears God and acts righteously is acceptable to him.* This is important for it marks Peter's growing awareness that it is not membership of a particular nation or the observance of its customs that makes someone acceptable to God. It is how one lives in response to God's demands. What makes someone acceptable to God is a life that reflects faith.
- Peter understands that the mission to the Gentiles is an extension of the mission of Jesus. It is not a new mission. This is a very important point.
- Importantly in this story is Peter's teaching that Jesus is to be the judge of the living and the dead and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name. He also clearly states that Jesus is "Lord of all".
- Significantly, Peter also proclaims that the role of Jesus has been foretold in the teachings of the prophets.
- Here is the big challenge for Luke's readers. Are they ready to accept the Gentiles fully into the messianic community and to have them baptized into the Church community? We are not yet ready for that and it will take the Council in Jerusalem for this to be endorsed but Luke is setting the foundation for that discussion here.

It is the opening line that sets out the fundamental message for today's feast: *God does not have favourites.* For the Judaism of his community, the presumption was that God would be pleased with those who obeyed the laws, who worshipped and offered the sacrifices, with those who in the minds of the community were loyal and observant Jews. But Peter is encouraging a whole new direction. He is saying that what matters is not the external observances but the *doing of what is right and acceptable to God.* Here we have a whole new set of parameters for discipleship. Mere outward show is no longer enough. You can attend the temple regularly and still be found to be unacceptable in the eyes of God if your way of life is not in accord with what God is demanding.

This would have been a shattering message to those reading it for the presumption was that the externals were all important. What Peter is telling Cornelius is that being a Jew is simply not enough any more to guarantee membership in the family of God. Now, because of Jesus, living in the Kingdom is open to all. Instead of circumcisions and Temple sacrifice, what is being asked for is a way of life, a way of life that reflects the way of life set out by Jesus Christ.

This change has come about through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Luke's community begins to reflect on the changes this brought to religion and what is fundamentally clear to them is that everything is now measured in terms of Jesus. No longer do we have to bring the temple into it, no longer do we have to bring the priesthood into it, no longer to the laws and teachings of the Pharisees and the scribes become the measuring stick for faithful living. No longer do we have to wonder just what law is essential or just what is being demanded of us. The rule of life has been set out for us. Now it is Jesus: His person, his teaching, his example and his death. Nothing more. He is, as he taught, the way to salvation.

Until now salvation depended on what we could do. How faithful we could be and how good we were at keeping the laws. Now our salvation depended on Jesus and all we have to do is align ourselves to him and allow him to take over our lives and direct us when as we go about our lives.

Notes on John 20:1-9

- In John the darkness represents the lack of faith. This story begins in the darkness and Mary, coming to the tomb at first does not understand and does not believe. In this setting Mary is not able to comprehend that maybe God has done something.
- For Mary there are two groups of people. There are the “they” who have taken the body away and the “we” who do not know what has happened to him. The situation thus begins with confusion and a lack of faith. It is as unbelievers that the two apostles approach the tomb.
- In John’s account of the resurrection he has the two characters: Mary running away from the tomb and Peter running towards the tomb. Initially they are both connected by unbelief.
- The empty tomb offers an opportunity for faith in the action of God.

This account in John about that first Easter morning is a story about faith and about how believing in Jesus is not about an accumulation of evidence but a willingness to believe in what God has said and promised. As John notes, until this point they were unable or unwilling to understand what had been revealed by God in the Scriptures. The tomb was empty and they were stuck there.

Of the three characters in the garden up till this point the only one who was able to believe was John. He saw the empty tomb and the clothing lying on the ground and he *saw and he believed*. I wonder why that was? Mary Magdalene could not believe. Peter was not able to believe. But something in John made him able to believe that Jesus had risen from the grave.

Again, it is all about faith. The Easter story is a story of faith, about the willingness to place ourselves into a different realm from the one that is governed by our experiences and our senses. It began back on Good Friday when all seemed lost. How was it possible to find the hand of God at work on Golgotha? Could God bring something good out of the crucifixion? Faith is the only thing that makes sense there, an understanding that whatever of the human experience, God is God of all things, even death.

And here again on Easter Sunday morning. Logic tells us that someone has stolen the body from the grave. None of those characters, with the possible exception of John, gave a thought to what the Scriptures had said about God’s plan for salvation. All they could operate in was the horizon of human experience. They were being challenged to believe that redemption meant God moving them on beyond the limits of the human imagination, beyond human ways of measuring and reckoning. It was tough walking into that empty tomb and having your first thought being: *I wonder what God has done here!* Yet that is precisely what God is asking of us.

Conclusion:

We have today two great messages for Easter. The first is that in the risen Jesus we have our salvation. It is not about what we can do for ourselves or what others can do for us. We have been set free in Jesus and now that he has risen from the dead we have a whole new way of living. This way of living is nothing other than Jesus himself. When we want to think about our lives. When we want to wonder about how we should be living. When we become concerned about our limitations, weaknesses and sinfulness, we turn to Jesus. He changes all of those things and adds a new element to our daily living.

Because of his death and resurrection, nothing else matters. If we live in Jesus all will be well. If our lives are modelled on Jesus and reflect the life and teachings of Jesus, then all will be well. We need not fear a single thing, not even death itself, if we live in Jesus and Jesus lives in us. Indeed, the more our lives reflect the life and teachings of Jesus, the more we will know his blessings and the blessings of the Kingdom.

The other message is more of a challenge. We celebrate today that Jesus is risen but there will be times when all we can see is the empty tomb. There will be times when we wonder just whether or not he is truly risen for we cannot seem to find him. That is when the challenge is at its greatest. We have a couple of choices. We can be like Mary and run away. We can be like Peter and look at the vacant spot in our lives and continue to struggle to believe or we can be like John the beloved disciple and see the cloths lying on the floor and believe that he is risen. That is the tough part. To believe that Jesus is risen and among us when we cannot always see him.

It is a day for rejoicing for we place ourselves into the hand of God who is victorious. If he can be victorious over the grave then we need not fear that our lives and our struggles are beyond his powerful and saving hand. Christ has died. But further to that, Christ IS risen. We do not say “Christ rose from the grave” but rather “Christ IS risen”. We are indeed an alleluia people.