

SAINT PAUL AND THE RESURRECTION

“Alleluia, the Lord is risen as he promised, alleluia.”¹

By Jim Seghers

Pope Benedict XVI points out that the “Risen Jesus Christ, ‘exalted above every other name’, is at the center of every reflection Paul makes.”² The Risen Christ is the compass of the Apostle’s life. It is his standard for evaluating events and things, the object of his labors in proclaiming the Gospel, and the great passion that sustained him amid his trials.

It was Paul’s dramatic encounter with the Risen Jesus, real and living, that gave the direction of his life an electrifying destiny and a single-minded purpose from which he never swerved. It began and ended with the amazing realization that the Risen Christ was the one “who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*” (Gal 2:20). This was the experience of God’s freely given and merciful love exemplified in the cross. This realization was not the result of intellectual inquiry, but a profound, life-altering relationship.

Years later he reminisced to his beloved Timothy: “I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Tim 1:15-16). Every encounter with Christ is profoundly personal. We often meet God where we least expect to find him.

St. Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as Lord, alive and present, inseparably connected the reality of his death with that of his Resurrection. The Risen One is always the One who was first crucified. The crucified Christ is not only the Risen Christ but he is also the Son who existed before time: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5).

In the Old Testament God pitched a tent to be close to his people. This was the Tabernacle Moses erected according to God’s plan (Heb 9:24). In the New Testament God’s presence took on a profound intimacy when “the Word became flesh and tabernacled [pitched his tent] among us” (Jn 1:14). The first prefigured the far greater reality, the tent of Christ’s humanity. Paul connected these elements in his letter to the Philippians 2:6-11, a passage that Pope Benedict XVI calls “one of the most elevated texts in the whole New Testament.” He describes the structure of the text in three stanzas.

The passage begins with the announcement of Christ’s preexistence: “though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). Then the focus shifts to the Son’s amazing self-abasement: “[he] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7) to the degree of humbling himself by his obedience “unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). The final stanza announces the Father’s exaltation of the Son: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which

¹ Antiphon, morning prayers on Easter Sunday from the Liturgy of the Hours.

² This essay draws heavily from the book *Saint Paul* by Pope Benedict XVI, chapters 9-11. It also gleaned ideas from Bishop Sheen’s superbly insightful *Life of Christ*, pp. 1-42. In the interest of space no further citations will be identified.

is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:9-11).

Jesus’ radical humility and his subsequent glorification stand in stark contrast to the numerous expressions of human pride that attempt to make man God but, instead, lead to self-destruction and misery. The tragedy of not knowing history is repeating its mistakes. Paul’s challenge of guiding Christians in the first century was no less daunting then it is today. The Jews were repulsed by the idea of a crucified Messiah. The Greeks, who prided themselves on their wisdom, considered absurd the very ideas of the Cross and the Resurrection.

Then the Apostle faced opposition from those Christians who wanted to shape Christianity to suit their own ideas and lifestyles. Christ does not allow us to pick and choose among his words, discarding the ones we find hard and accepting the ones that please our fancy. To the scandal ridden and factious church in Corinth Paul challenged his disciples with the force of the Cross: “for the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:18-23). It is no different today. Many view the Crucified Risen One as a “stumbling block” and “folly”.

What is the lesson of history? Christ brings the sword of truth that cuts through our rationalizations and separates good from evil. The Cross shows that there is no room for compromise: only acceptance or rejection. Jesus affirmed: “He who is not with me is against me” (Mt 12:30). The advent of Jesus initiates a terrible battle within ourselves between good and evil. As Christ draws near we become conscious of our guilt. Then we come face to face with a choice. We can ask for mercy and find peace, or we can turn against him because we are unwilling to give up our sinful attachments.

The Cross and Resurrection reveal “the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:24-25). The Church has endured twenty centuries of persecution from without and betrayals from within. There were dark times when the Church seemed teetering on the edge of oblivion. Yet powerful civilizations and the machinations of evil men have disappeared into the footnote status in history while the Risen Christ has triumphed. “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:17). So it is today.

We are now living in dark days, not because of the present economic crisis that is merely a symptom, but because of the massive rejection of Christ as society slides deeper into paganism. So we need to approach the meat and potato events that creates the hectic pace of our lives with confidence remembering the words of Jesus: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). It is a kingdom built on the invincible power of truth and love. It is a kingdom where we can be at peace while grappling with our day-to-day challenges. Therefore, as we reflect on the Resurrection, let us confidently exclaim with Thomas: “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28). The Risen Christ is the guarantee of our vindication and the surety of the final victory.