

2nd Sunday of Easter Sermon (Charles Bishop)

Exodus 14.10-end 15.20-21 - Revelation 1.4-8 - John 20.19-end

"I speak to you who have just been reborn in baptism, my little children in Christ, you who are the new offspring of the Church, gift of the Father, proof of Mother Church's fruitfulness. This is the octave day of your new birth." This is how St Augustine of Hippo, an early Church father, began his sermon on the first Sunday after Easter. He speaks of rebirth, renewal, and forgiveness of sins. This theme of regeneration has been strongly expounded to us, the faithful, over this Easter season. Maundy Thursday takes its name from 'Novum Mandatum', the New Commandment. In the Exsultet we are told "Christians everywhere are washed clean from sin... restored to grace."

Reborn, restored, renewed, redeemed. Easter ushers in a new life, a new creation. And we can share in this new life through the sacrament of Baptism. Isaiah tells us that "the former things have come to pass" and the Blessed Apostle Paul asserts that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." And to be in Christ is to be in his body, to be in his Church. To be baptised is to share in the life of Christ, to share in his humanity, and when Christ ascends to heaven, mankind's fallen humanity ascends with Him. Today, I would like to focus on three different aspects of the recreation of Christ.

First, in Revelation 21, we are told of the "new heaven and the new earth". Once again, newness means refreshment, change and regeneration. Last week we heard how Mary Magdalene, on first laying eyes on the risen Lord mistook him for the gardener of the garden where Christ's tomb was. Of course, she is incorrect, but in another way, she could not be more right. Adam lost our right to dwell the garden of Eden, but Christ returns us to the new garden of creation, one where seeds of forgiveness and reconciliation flourish. And although we have been promised a new creation, we have a responsibility of care to the goodness of the world that God has given us. To live out what Christ has taught us, and to be worthy of the new creation we have been promised means that we cannot neglect the creation that was first given to us. Christ has promised us the New Eden and has purchased it for us by his death and making atonement for sin. People often worry about whether their pet might be going to heaven, and my great aunt used to say that if her golden retrievers weren't in heaven, then she wouldn't be going. And while I can't answer for whether dogs go to heaven, it does seem that a new earth has been promised, the creation that Isaiah speaks of when the lion and the calf shall lie down together.

Secondly, we have the recreation of human nature. It is drilled into the Christian that humanity is fallen, "we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". This is, of course, true. But now our focus turns to how Christ destroys sin, and "breaks the prison bars of death". We know he does this through his death, and St Augustine goes on to tell us how the Sacrament of Baptism allows us to join ourselves to Christ. Baptism is, he tells us, "a sacrament of new life which begins here and now with the forgiveness of all past sins." At baptism Christians undergoing a startling ontological change, whereby our whole being is transformed. E L Mascall a prominent 19th Century Anglican theologian writes that, "by baptism, without loss of personal identity, we are incorporated into Christ... and participate in his glorified human nature, so that all he possess becomes ours." What a wonder! What a startlingly radical understanding of God's love for us! A human, fallen as we are, can share in the life of God. And to me, retaining our individual identity is as crucial a point as any. I gain all that Christ offers and all I lose is my sin.

While our recreation comes from baptism, we still need to recreate ourselves, morally and spiritually. And today's reading gives us the blueprints for the achievement of this end. First, the spreading of the peace. Fr Robert spoke on this subject last week, telling us that the role the peace plays within the liturgy is a practical one, one that intends that we are reconciled to each other before participating in

the life-giving sacrament of the Eucharist. The form that this moral reconstruction takes is one of forgiveness. As Christ commanded on Maundy Thursday, we should love one another as Christ loved us. And intrinsic to how love is practiced, and this is the second point, is in forgiveness of sins. Christ tells the disciples that if they forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. As we are told in the Lord's prayer, if we forgive the sins of others, so shall we also be forgiven. This is the moral shift that announces that God has ushered in the new order of the world. What was once an eye for an eye has become forgiveness. If we are to act as Christ acted to us, we are to go beyond simply treating others as we want to be treated. That "golden rule" isn't the revolutionary moral message of Christianity. It is to act towards others as Christ acted towards us. To be willing to give our life wholly for our neighbour. Here is the second element of the recreation of Christ. A new human nature, entered into at baptism, fulfilled in unrequited love for others.

And finally, the most anticipated of all. The new life. The new life that begins on earth, and which culminates in our joining fully to God who is the beginning and the end. And once again, the mode of this enjoining is the wonderful sacrament that Christ gives to us, described in the synoptic Gospels, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I have always been taught that at baptism you are "given all the graces necessary to become a saint." And what a Saint is, is someone who the Church knows to be in heaven, a part of the new life. And this new life evades all description, transcends any human conception. All we know is, is that it is when we can share directly in the life of Christ.

So, recognise the real change that was affected in you at baptism. Understand your duty to God's marvellous creation. And act as though your human nature has been exalted to the level of God. In this Easter season, may we all be recreated to share more fully in the life of God.

Amen.