

Easter 4 Year B 2018

Last Sunday I stood, along with several hundred-other people, gazing up at the great astronomical clock in the campanile of Messina Cathedral, Sicily. Midday arrived, and the gigantic rampant lion (perhaps 15 feet tall) at the top of the tower moved his head and tail and roared deafeningly three times. This was followed by the huge cockerel underneath flapping its wings and crowing three times. It gets better! A gilded cathedral rose from a leaden wave (a reference to the terrible earthquake and tidal wave which destroyed Messina in 1908, killing 80,000 souls). Above this scene, the Lord rose from the grave to the amazement of the two soldiers on either side, who fell on their faces. Then, as Ave Maria played deafeningly loudly over a cracked loudspeaker system, the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary held up a letter as several gilded bronze men revolves around her, bowing as they went. This was apparently a reference to a vision which occurred during the medieval period. It was all very Sicilian!

I hope you won't think too badly of me, if I say that the Resurrection of the Lord in this display looked a little bit like a jack-in-the-box. This is not to decry the wonders of a 1930s miracle of mechanisation, but it did help me to continue to reflect on the Resurrection itself. Here we are today leaving behind the Gospel accounts of Easter, remembering however that we are still very much within the Easter Season - the longest of the Church year. In fact, the lectionary wisely makes this shift to make us consider just what Resurrection Life might look like. Today we are challenged to engage through our readings. It is a hopeless task trying to neatly 'box' the Resurrection and Post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus into some orderly calendar of events recorded in the Gospels. The apostles and disciples of the Lord, from Mary Magdalene and Peter to Cleopas and Thomas enter new and extraordinary life, transformed through the Resurrection as Christ's Resurrection becomes theirs too. And this is the life to which all Christians are called. It's an exciting journey, sometimes a perplexing and even a terrifying one, yet if we allow ourselves to journey openly and in the knowledge of our call to continual transformation, we find that we enter ever more deeply into the knowledge of God's love for us revealed through Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Does the shepherd image work for you? It might not at all - most of us are so far removed from such an understanding of country life. Many of us like hymns about shepherds, but in some ways, it is not an image that (for instance) young people would readily identify with. However, I want us to think about the Gospel text in a slightly different way.

The seven great 'I AM' statements in John's Gospel are (as I probably say every time we come across them!) profound reflections by the Gospel writer on Christian Life. They are linked to the seven signs (what the other Gospel writers call 'miracles') which John records. I don't think there is any coincidence that 'I am the good shepherd' is the middle 'I am' reflection, because it allows us the most profound understanding of what living a Resurrection life might be from which all else flows. I'm sure this is why John places it right in the heart of the Gospel.

What did you hear in that Gospel reading? Did you notice a repeated phrase we heard four times? Because what this passage represents is a call of love to each one of us.

- 'The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep,'
- 'I lay down my life for the sheep,'
- 'For this reason the Father loves me, that I lay down my life or order to take it up again,'
- 'I lay it down of my own accord.'

What does this have to do with Easter - with Resurrection? **Everything.** Here is the answer to what Resurrection life means. I John puts it like this: 'We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for each other.' Jesus calls and chooses each one of us in love by laying down his life for us. There is no agenda, no condition, no demand. He leads us to Resurrection life - HIS Resurrection life - through giving himself wholeheartedly for us.

What does laying our lives down for others mean? It means that in all we do, we have concern and love for the 'other.' The way that we interact with others: the kindly word with a lonely person, the tender care of those we love, visiting or nursing the sick or elderly, affirming those who feel broken, calling for justice and truth in every situation, praying, praying, praying - all these are signs of lives laid down, lives of Resurrection - here and now.

In leading such lives, Christ's Resurrection is a present reality - a sign of the depth of God's love within our humanity here and now. Never think that your participation can only ever be trivial. Every action which reveals this life-laid-down-love helps to bring about the Kingdom of God - a step closer to heavenly glory and unity within God's Love.

I visited Valencia on my holiday, and found myself exploring the story of Martin Martinez, whose photo I discovered in a church near the cathedral. Martin was a 25-year-old priest caught up in the Civil War in 1936. He taught in a seminary, and when it was torched he was subsequently arrested and spent several days comforting those imprisoned with him, comforting them, giving them communion and the like. It was decided that he would be executed, as so many other thousands of other priests and religious were. Several photos were taken by a German photographer who was with the Republicans holding him, and Martin is shown smiling in the sun in a corn filled field - a face smiling as it prepares to enter the eternity of God's Love. They asked him if he wanted to face away from the firing squad, and he refused. He told the men that he hoped that they would know God's forgiveness and peace within their lives, said 'Long live Christ the King!' and submitted to a martyr's death.

I tell you this, not to make a gloomy end to a sermon which has probably gone on for too long, but to point out that what Martin did in consoling those he was with, both the prisoners and those who were detailed to execute him, was a wonderful example of this call to true life in Jesus, quite apart from his actual death.

Never underestimate the effect of things you do in faith. The Good Shepherd calls you by name and loves you so much that he laid down his life for you in order to call you to his Resurrection Life.



Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:
raise us, who trust in him,
from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,
that we may seek those things which are above,
where he reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for eve

Acts 4.5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, 9if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is

"the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone."

12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

1 John 3.16-end

16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

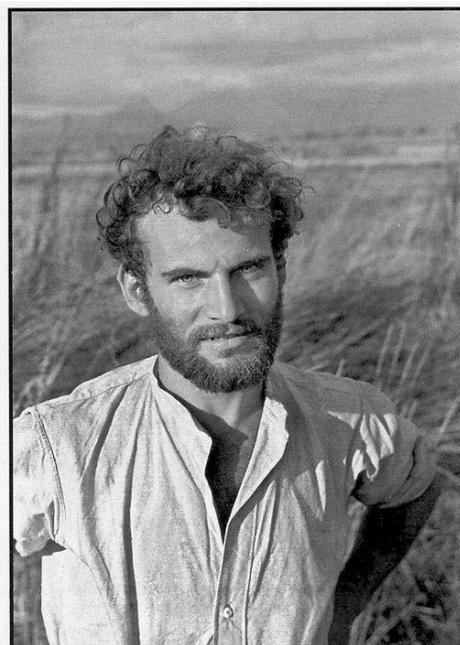
17How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10.11-18

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'



Blessed Martin Martinez Pascual