

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Easter 2010

By Fr Steele Hartmann

The Resurrection is about God's determination to be our God. As Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, put it, "The Resurrection is in part about the sheer toughness and persistence of God's love. When we have done our worst, God remains God — and remains committed to being our God" (Tokens of Trust). While I was in the US some years ago I came across a story that might help me here. During the struggle to get voting rights for black people in the Southern US in the 1960s, a man, Rev James Bevel, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference set up by Dr Martin Luther King Jr, was attempting to help a group of black people register to vote in the city of Selma, Alabama. He was standing at the front of a line of black voter applicants on the steps of the Court House, peering in to see what the delay was. Sheriff Jim Clark came out, told the group they were having difficulty getting prepared for the voter registration process, and then gruffly ordered them to "quit blocking the entrance" and move at least fifty meters from the door — the entrance was about twenty meters wide and they were standing in a single line at the very edge of the wide stairs.

Rev Bevel motioned for his people to move down the stairs and stand away from the entrance. After about half an hour, he smiled at them, motioned them to follow him up the stairs (in single file), and once again he peered into the Court House through the glass doors. Suddenly about twenty police, in riot gear and gas masks, stormed out of the doors, waded into the crowd swinging their truncheons, dropping a few tear gas canisters and beating the crowd away. Sheriff Jim Clark (an enormous man of 6' 4" and almost 330 pounds) knocked Bevel down and stood over him on the street, raising his truncheon ready to strike. Bevel looked up at him, pointed his finger in his face and said with a smile: "Jim Clark, you're not the evil man you think you are. There's a lot of love energy in you and I'm the person who's going to get it out of you ... because there's only one thing you can't do to me. You can't make me not love you". And Jim Clark stood there, bewildered, looking like a big dummy, for how do you respond to a challenge like that!

Well, in the Resurrection after the Crucifixion, God says to us in Jesus, "I don't care what you have done. There is nothing you can do to make me not love you. I will not go away". I remember hearing a Jewish man, a holocaust survivor, being interviewed on the radio. Because of his experience and the experience of Jewish people, he said he could no longer believe, for God had not been there when the crunch came, when so many innocents lost their lives in such great suffering. "And yet," he said in great anguish of heart, "YHWH will not go away. I wish he would go away, but he just stands there". Such is our God! In the Resurrection, this God says to us, "I will not go away; I will be with you; I will be God-with-you".

Resurrection is not about the miraculous and the powerful. Resurrection is about God's determination to be our God; he will not go away.

Jesus' disciples had betrayed him, denied him and deserted him in his hour of need. In the agony of his anguish Jesus could only cry out, "Why have you abandoned me?" This is the context of the Resurrection. Resurrection did not do away with sin: We are still apt to deny him, reject him and desert him, and given the opportunity we would probably crucify him again, to be rid of him again (Rom 7:21ff. See also Heb 6:4-7). Resurrection did not even change what had happened: When he appeared to them he showed them the marks of the nails in his hands and his feet and said, "Yes, it is really me" (Lk 24:39; Jn 20:27). Resurrection, far from being this amazing something that changes everything, is something else: it is about forgiveness. One who has been in a long-term relationship and has discovered their partner has been cheating on them, knows full well Jesus' pain in his disciples' betrayal: the life they had together has been killed; no future lies in store; all is dead. Sometimes — and perhaps, often enough — the one who sinned sincerely and absolutely regrets what they have done, but are powerless to undo what they have done: didn't realise the harm they could do, had no wish to hurt anyone, or just simply didn't think about it. Here Jesus' words on the cross take on new meaning: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). If these two are to have a life together again, it can only be because the one who was so critically hurt absorbs the pain into themselves. This is what forgiveness is all about. This is what Resurrection is all about. It is not something magical that makes things nice again; rather it involves dealing with great pain — though, that life together is possible again, is a real miracle. For Resurrection is about practical, hard, down-to-earth forgiveness, the kind that comes with the destruction of relationships.

Jesus has told us, "Where two or three gather in his name, he is there with them in their midst" (Mt 18:20). When two Christians marry, they gather in Jesus name: he is there with them. In a sense, what they have done together is built a little Church, the most basic kind of Church, in which they might enter in and worship the God who is in their midst. They love this God in and through their love of the other, and they are loved by this God in and through the love of the other. This is what the mystery of the Incarnation is all about: it is about a God who is with us in a real and incarnate way and who loves us in a real and incarnate way. Here we can appreciate the effects of betrayal, for it is a sin that destroys the Temple (Jn 2:19). And here we can appreciate this morning's Gospel. Peter is one who had betrayed Jesus by denying him three times (Jn 18:15ff). This Jesus then comes to him and asks three times, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15ff). Here Jesus offers forgiveness in the form of an ongoing relationship to the one who, in his sinning, has realised what he has done (Lk 22:61-62), and who can only say, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you" (Jn 21:15,16,17).

There are many questions Jesus might have asked Peter: Are you sorry? Do you promise never to betray me again? Will you now promise to amend your ways? But he simply says, "Do you love me?" Without love, and the commitment it calls for, there can be no basis for an ongoing relationship, and all our resolutions will come to nothing. In the Resurrection God is declaring that his love is tough enough to absorb the hurt and pain we cause. His question, "Do you love me?" is asking us if we can meet him there, so that we can go on together: Can we rebuild the Temple? In his Resurrection, Christ's first words to his disciples are, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:20). There is no other way to peace and reconciliation except through forgiveness. Resurrection is about a love that can forgive, making possible new life together again.

Soon we shall celebrate Pentecost, that day when Christ gave us his Spirit. On that day Christ breathed on us and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those who sins you forgive, they are forgiven them; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). His is a Spirit of forgiveness. His gift is the means by which we can forgive, making resurrection real and possible. This is his greatest gift, for we, even without trying, can and do hurt one another. When we find it in ourselves to absorb the hurt and forgive so that life together is still possible, we must know that Christ's Spirit is at work in us. In his command, "Love your enemies," Christ is challenging us to allow this Spirit to have free range in our hearts (Mt 5:44). If we all could rise to do this, the Church we would raise up would be universal in its proportions, and we would know Christ truly risen, alive and well and truly with us, in our midst (Mt 28:20; Mk 16:20). "O Lord, let your kingdom come!"