

“Christ is Alive and Goes Before Us” Fr John Spring – Sunday 21st March 2010

It is the practice in this parish to have an Easter theme. I don't know what else was done to express that theme – whether you had banners up and special sermons and songs and children's activities - but it was drawn to my attention by Ann who paints the Paschal Candles in our two churches. The theme provides the subject for the painting of those candles.

This year, I have nominated as the Easter theme

“Jesus is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there”.

In the Gospel According to John, the final chapter is set in Galilee, which tells us that the disciples did return there, at least for a time. In the Gospels According to St Matthew and St Mark, the disciples go back to Galilee because they have been repeatedly instructed to do so. In Mark 14.28, Jesus says, *“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee”* and in 16.7, the angel at the tomb says to the three women, *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you”*.

Likewise, in Matthew 26.32, Jesus tells his disciples, *“But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee”*. In Matthew 28.7, the angel tells the woman, *“Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him’”*. Immediately after, in 28.10, as if the women needed a reminder, Jesus himself meets them on the road and says, *“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me”*. Consequently, in Matthew 28.16, we read that *“the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them”*.

So Matthew locates the Ascension in Galilee, but Luke locates it in Bethany. That is because the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles do not preserve the tradition of a commanded return to Galilee but focus upon the apostles being commanded, instead, to *“remain in the city”*, Jerusalem, until power came upon them. They were to stay there until Pentecost when the Spirit would come upon them and bestow power upon them.

However, it may be that there was a short return to Galilee to take refuge and regroup, and then the apostles and disciples returned as commanded to Jerusalem to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to establish the Jerusalem Church and to begin their mission to the world. This, indeed, is the view I take. The disciples went home to Galilee, then later returned to Jerusalem to build the future under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But why did I choose this Easter theme, *“Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee and you will see him there”*?

You will see on the candles this year (when they are blessed and set in place) that there is a road leading away into the distance. This is the road to Galilee. It is also the road into the future, and for us, the road into our future as a parish. We have arrived, perforce, at a point where we have no option but to move forward from where we were, to take with us the things we can and to pray and plan for what is yet to be.

Like the first disciples suddenly experiencing the death, the return and then the departure of their Messiah Lord, you have experienced the sudden absence, return and then departure of your vicar of ten years, the Reverend Catherine Eaton. Like the first disciples, you now have no option but to move forward, but the question is “How?” How will you move forward?

In our Lord's teaching and commands regarding a return to Galilee, he was providing for his disciples to move forward in the right way. They were to go to Galilee to meet him there. There they would confirm the reality of his resurrection (it was not an hallucination which happened in the hysteria surrounding the events in Jerusalem). There they would also be reassured that he was as much with them in Galilee as he was in Jerusalem. There, in Galilee, they would be re-enthused with his mission and renewed in their calling to follow him. There their love for him would be fanned to a heat and deepened. Then they would realise that his crucifixion and death was victory, and his rising was vindication – vindication of their faith in him, as well as of his claim to be the Messiah and God's only Son.

Then, having re-established Jesus Christ as the centre of their life and their world - their past, their present and their future, in this world and in eternity - they would be able to go back to Jerusalem and there receive the Holy Spirit, and take up the challenge of being the church in the world, and the church to the world.

This then is why I have chosen and applied those words of Scripture to YOU: "Jesus is going ahead of YOU into Galilee. YOU will see him there".

Of course, another question one always asks, setting out on a journey, is "What will it be like?" I don't want to suggest to you that it will be an experience of unadulterated pleasure. At times the way will be hard, and there will be cost, just as there was cost for the disciples in abandoning Jerusalem and going back to Galilee.

Have you ever been at the football when the game is over by half-way through the third quarter? And supporters of one team begin climbing the steps and making their way out. And did you notice how the supporters from the other team were so sympathetic, and tried to comfort them in their loss? No? No, and neither have I. Climbing those steps, after watching your team fail dismally, you keep your eyes down and your ears closed, because you know you are more than likely to get heckled and have rather unkind things said about your team.

So in going back to Galilee, there will be an element of that. There is an element of retreat. And it is not pleasant. We will still have tears to shed. However, as we leave Jerusalem and head home for Galilee, we have to remember the words of Psalm 126:

**5Those who sow in tears
Shall reap with songs of joy.
6They that go out weeping, bearing the seed,
shall come again in gladness,
bringing their sheaves with them.**

Something else we have to face is the fact of death. Not a physical death, but an emotional death and a death of spirit. You have suffered a series of losses, and you have experienced and are experiencing death in emotional and spiritual terms. Your faith may well have been shaken. You may well be angry with God. You may well be angry with me, because I wouldn't be here if the changes had not happened, and I am not the people who have departed and do not do things the way they did.

So there is death in the experience, but again, we have to remember Mary who anointed Jesus' feet. At our study group on Wednesday in my house at St Andrews, the group was inclined to think Mary

had more than a foreboding of Jesus' impending death. She had a strong intuition, or she had been listening to what he had said and she believed him. He was about to die, and so she was, as Jesus said, anointing him in readiness for his death and burial. Mary was already coming to terms with something the others were refusing to believe could possibly happen.

That said, there is another side of the ledger, an exciting side, a joyous side, to going to back to Galilee and journeying into the future with Jesus, and that can be found in what St Paul has to say this morning in Philippians 3. It is as if I hear Paul saying, "I want to go Galilee, whatever it costs. I want to go to Galilee, because (and these *are* his words):

10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

13Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now how shall I sum this up for you? Let me ask you to turn to hymn **TIS 653**.

I love this hymn partly because it is about healing. I love it partly because I learnt it from Bishop Owen Dowling who was one of the most kindly, wise and inspiring bishops I have ever met and one of the best ministers of healing it has been my privilege to know. However, I offer it to you this morning because it sums up, for me, how I see where we are and where we have to go. The Lord has commanded us to leave where we are and to go to Galilee, and find him there, but we know he "goes before us" – that is, he leads us. So it is that in this hymn we sing these words: "Christ is alive and goes before us".

1This is a day of new beginnings, / time to remember and move on, / time to believe what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that's gone.

2For, by the life and death of Jesus, / God's mighty Spirit, now as then, / can make for us a world of difference, / as faith and hope are born again.

3Then let us, with the Spirit's daring, / step from the past and leave behind / our disappointment, guilt and grieving, / seeking new paths and sure to find.

4Christ is alive and goes before us / to show and share what love can do. / This is a day of new beginnings: / our God is making all things new!

Fr John Spring, Acting Vicar, Sorrento and Rye