

## THE LAST SUPPER TO EASTER

(J.F.M.H. 3.3.2016)

The account of Our Lord's life on earth given in the Gospels is by and large a hidden one. It was only in the last three years of it that He carried out His public Ministry. At the end of that, His death by crucifixion was very public indeed. Even when He was on the cross He was challenged to show His power and might by coming down from the cross, to save himself and the two thieves, but He refused to be tempted. He had accepted His death and terrible torture for our sins and for love of us and He was not to be deflected from this. At the Last Supper Christ changed the substance of the unleavened Paschal bread and wine into the substance of His Body and Blood, as food and drink for us.

The next day at Calvary it was offered up in its natural human form. He died at the ninth hour, on the day before the Jewish Passover. It was the time when the Paschal Lambs used for the Paschal supper, were being killed. The spear thrust, which fulfilled the prophecies "*Not a bone of Him shall be broken.*" and "*They shall look on Him whom they have pierced.*" (Jn. 19. 34-37) prevented a bone of Jesus from being broken. This made Christ the real Paschal Lamb, the food of the New Israel. The water and blood flowing from His side, foreshadowed on one hand His Baptism, and on the other His Divine Blood in the Holy Eucharist. St Luke tells us that from the sixth to the ninth hour there was darkness over the earth, and at the ninth hour when Christ died, He cried out "*Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit*", and the Veil of the Temple was rent in two, the earth quaked, rocks were split, graves opened, and many bodies of the Saints rose from their tombs. The crowd, who had assembled to see the crucifixion, when they saw what had taken place, returned home "*beating their breasts*". The Roman Centurion with the soldiers remained on duty at Calvary, standing "*ever against Jesus*". When he felt the earth trembling beneath his feet, and beheld Christ in death sending forth that great cry, fear fell upon him, his eyes were opened, and he gave glory to God. "*Ay, truly this was a just man, this was indeed the Son of God.*" His faith affected the frightened legionaries, and they echoed his words "Truly, this was the Son of God!" That confession by heathen men contrasted with the behaviour of most of the Jews who seeing what had come to pass, showing guilt, withdrew. Soon there were left on Calvary, the soldiers guarding the three condemned men and those who loved Christ. Luke says "*all His acquaintances and the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things.*" We know the names of some of them, who stood more closely to Jesus, Mary His Mother, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee and John. All their eyes were fixed on the hanging body of Christ, for they clung to the hope that even now some marvel would occur.

However, for them it was not over yet. Jesus had died about the ninth hour, but for the victim souls suffering round Him, their agony carried on for several more hours, as the dead body of Christ and the two thieves hung on the three crosses. The Roman law laid down that no condemned man should be left upon the gibbet longer than one day, and for the Jews on the day before the Passover, the Command was most imperative. It was not fitting that the Holy Day should be desecrated by the spectacle of the crucified bodies. Therefore the Jews went in search of Pilate, and asked him to have the legs of the condemned men broken, so that the bodies might be removed the sooner. With broken legs there would be nothing to support the body already gasping for breath, and the crucified men, if still alive, would die of suffocation fairly quickly. The need to get The Roman Governor's authority to do this caused a delay before the Crucifixion was complete. In the case of Christ His legs were not broken, instead a Roman soldier pierced His side. Christ's suffering continued in these early members of His Mystical body as it does today, and has throughout the intervening time.

Three days later the resurrection of our Blessed Lord from the grave occurred. It has been regarded as the central mystery of the Catholic faith. Certainly from apostolic times it has been held to be the pivot, round which revolved and on which depended the arguments of Christian theology. For while the death of Christ might be taken to imply that He was in no way different from other men, His triumph over death could have no other meaning than the significant challenge of His claim to unique divinity was true. To die in defence of one's belief is evidence, indeed, of sincerity, but it cannot demonstrate the authenticity of that conviction, since men have died for contradictory beliefs. That Christ was sincere cannot be denied; the

conclusion that He was therefore divine is also paradoxically logical: for one who sincerely believes Himself to be God and dies to prove it, must either be hopelessly insane or really divine. But the final touch is given to the argument, and all the proof rendered irresistible when to it is added the reappearance of the dead Christ, alive, clothed and habited in a human body. The argument may be put thus: Our Lord claimed to be God, died to attest the sincerity of His claim, was raised up by His own divine power to life again in testimony of the truth of His doctrine. The author of life and death had therefore added His own witness to the witness of Christ. God has sealed by His power the declaration of His Son. If Christ were not God, God Himself would have been party to a deceit.

St. Paul is so persuaded of the efficacy of this, that he seems to be content to base the whole argument of Christianity upon it; for he says expressly that if it be not a fact that Christ has risen for the dead then is our faith vain. For him it is no question of spiritual experience of a risen master, but he is convinced of the bodily life of the man Christ. He proceeds, in fact, in the epistle to the Corinthians to arrange those who had been witnesses of the fact of Christ's reappearance. He put them in some sort of chronological order. The only two whom he mentions by name, Peter and James, are the very two of whom he tells us in another place that over 15 days he had discussions with them in Jerusalem. (Galatians 1:18-24) Nor was there evidently any expectation in the minds of those who saw Him buried, that Christ would break out of the tomb. Looking back they might remember the hints He had made about a three day's sojourn in the grave; but the holy women set out on the first Easter morning to anoint a body that was presumably dead, and thus preserve it from its ensuing corruption. The account, too, of the disciples who were on their way to Emmaus when the Lord Himself met them, points in the same direction. They were actually going away from Jerusalem, though they had heard the report of the women that an angel had told them of the resurrection of the Master, so unprepared were they for any vision of Him. Even when the rest had seen Him, St. Thomas could continue to doubt, confident in the unexpectedness of the event. The resurrection then is to be accounted as a fact, not of hysteria, but of history.

The historic side of the mystery must never be obscure. The new birth and the feeling of hope which the season of spring brings with it, is all contained in the notion of Easter and its festive interpretation. But beneath all that, and giving it the value which it bears for us in life, is the historical fact that was witnessed to by so many: "*He rose again according to the Scriptures.*" No hallucination will account for it, for they felt His hands and feet, and put their fingers into the print of the nails and into the open wound of the spear. By the lakeside He ate with them. In the room He appeared when not expected, and was seen by more than five hundred brethren at once. It showed no sense of visionary excitement, but was a fact, as well vouched for as any other fact of history. On this fact our faith rests, in the sense that it testifies to the Divinity of Christ. As such the Jews demanded it, the Pharisees understood it and prepared for it, our Lord promised it; (Mat. 16.21, Mark 8.31-38, there are about 6 occasions of these predictions)) and to it the apostles confidently appealed. It causes the certain belief of our own resurrection. It tells us that as He triumphed over death, so must we triumph in His mystical body. It bids us look forward to a new life, not back to the wasted and fallen years. It comes indeed as the basis of faith, but also as pointing to the lesson of hopefulness, for the actions of Christ are not merely the examples we must strive to copy, but they are still more importantly the very power by which we get grace to overcome and to attain our final reward.

Every Easter the Church proclaims; "*On the third day He rose again from the dead.*" The Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 638-658 gives an account of Christ's Resurrection and shows its importance. They show that at the Resurrection, Christ's great victory and triumph over sin and death, was so unostentatious. What a contrast to His public and terrible death on the cross, though how very like the way Our Lord chose to be a witness to His Almighty Father for most of His life. We know of the Resurrection only through His Church, and even then only as Christ having risen. The actual Resurrection itself has been depicted by many artists, but the possible witnesses, the soldiers who were sent to guard the tomb, were silent, perhaps silenced is a better description. They took the money offered by the Chief Priest and Elders, who told them to tell people, "that His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep." However the Resurrection was real. Death could not, and had not severed the Human nature from the Divine Person.