

Easter Vigil 2016

Exordium

On Thursday night, John spoke of memory; on Friday Sean spoke of imagination; tonight I want to start by speaking of nostalgia, the imagination of the past. In the early nineteenth century, nostalgia was considered a terminal condition. It was even used as a medical description of the cause of death. For example, during the American Civil War, doctors used it on death certificates. Things have moved on and now nostalgia is respectable emotion, even if it isn't quite what it used to be. Just as well, you may say, with all the commemorations to be undertaken in this year. There is the on-going marking of WWI and, needless to mention, the Easter Rising. Perhaps the sense of nostalgia and loss is already touching us; next year for sure! Let hope it won't be on our death certificate: died of nostalgia over Orlagh!

Propositio

Easter itself and in a special way the three days form an exceptional enactment of memorial. And we may well ask ourselves again what are we doing, here, now, 2016 commemorating an event that took place so long ago? Is it memory? Is it imagination? Is it nostalgia? In reality, it is all of these things and much greater than each of them.

Probationes

(1) I've been struck more and more by the Jewish understanding of memorial. In particular, there are wonderful words in the Mishnah, that collection of rabbinic opinions. Regarding the Passover, we read:

In every generation a person is duty-bound to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt, since it is said, *And you shall tell your son in that day saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt* (Ex. 13:8).

Therefore, we are duty-bound to thank, praise, glorify, honour, exalt, extol, and bless him who did for our forefathers and for us all these miracles. He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, anguish to joy, mourning to festival, darkness to great light, subjugation to redemption, so we should say before him, Hallelujah. (Pesahim 10:5)

You can feel the excitement and the energy. Thus, the past is not just the past; evocation is not merely for comfort and nostalgia; memorial has power to speak to the present and release the potential of the future. We should feel a certain family sympathy with the words of the rabbis, because what we do at Mass every day is really the same, as we do this in memory.

In our own tradition, we read in the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation:

We do this in memory of Jesus Christ, our Passover and our lasting peace. We celebrate his death and resurrection and look for the coming of that day when he will return to give us the fullness of joy.

(2) Our Christian memorialising is no mere glance to the past: the same Risen Lord is present here among us this evening in our celebration.

In the Passover tradition, the youngest asks a question: Why is this night different any other night? The Easter Proclamation captures our excitement:

This is the night when first you set the children of Israel free: you saved our ancestors from slavery in Egypt and led them dry-shod through the sea.
This is the night when you led your people by a pillar of fire: with your light you showed them the way and destroyed all the darkness of sin.
This is the night when Christians everywhere, washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement, are restored to grace and grow in holiness.

This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and in triumphant glory rose from the grave.

It is, therefore, no ordinary night for us. Hence our gathering at this unusual hour; hence our symbols of light and darkness; hence our readings and our prayers; hence our Eucharist. It is a night of light, of love and of hope.

Never have we needed this word of hope so much! This is true, so to speak, both externally and internally, in the world at large and in our own lives. When we look around and see fracture and tragedy, we see it on the grand scale Syria, Paris, Brussels, Bosnia. In our own lives we all carry things—this week's tragedy in Buncrana is an extreme example of something true of us all at different levels and times. We could all give examples of things we dearly wish had never happened.

In response, we Christians do not hold up a doctrine, as if we could explain it all. Instead, we speak of God's disclosure of God's self in Jesus—in particular God's compassion and mercy. We offer an extraordinary narrative of God's entering human darkness, even evil, in Jesus' death to speak to us words of life and hope from within the darkness. We tell the tale of God's victory over death in the resurrection of Jesus, present among us as we gather. And so we have hope...hope not in a message but in a person, the Risen Lord, here among us.

(3) But how can we, how can I, encounter him tonight? There is a clue in the Easter Gospel from Luke: Why look for the living among the dead? In his Easter homily of 2013, Pope Francis reflecting on the very same verse in the Gospel said:

How often does Love have to tell us: Why do you look for the living among the dead? ... Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: he is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk: you won't be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don't be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you, he is with you and he will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do.

Peroratio

It is a mighty invitation—the next step is ours, mine to take. Our memorial of Jesus, so rich in imagination, does not take us down the path of even healthy nostalgia. Instead, it opens us to the present and the future. In the end, this is our story too. The last part of our opening prayer from tonight bring us into the story as well. We pray it again.

O God, your saving plan has brought us to the glory of this night.
Slaves, we become your sons and daughters,
poor, your mercy makes us rich,
sinners, you count us among your saints.
Bring us to know the place
that is ours in the unfolding story of your purpose,
and instil in our hearts the wonder of your salvation.

Grant this through Jesus Christ,
our Passover and our peace,
who lives and reigns with you now and always
in the unity the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen