

Five weeks ago, at the Vespers of Forgiveness Sunday, we sang, “Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast”, and prayed that “having sailed across the great sea of the Fast we may reach the third-day resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Today we reach the last Sunday of that Fast. Next Friday at Vespers the first hymn sung at “Lord I have cried...” begins, “Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our souls...”. Lent is almost at an end. Today is its last Sunday. Looking forward we see the brief relaxation of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday before the plunge into the renewed fast of Holy Week, and our emergence into the light of the Lord’s resurrection.

When we sang those words, not so long ago, most of us had no idea of what a challenge this Lent would turn out to be. We did not foresee churches closed, the Liturgy suspended and people locked down in their homes. Things moved far faster than we had anticipated, but by now it has become clear that, short of an astounding miracle, we will not be able as a community to celebrate the goal of our voyage across the sea of the Fast – the Lord’s resurrection. “As a community” – this does not mean that the celebration is cancelled, of course. We must remember that we are not tied to dates on a calendar. Nor do we celebrate some kind of cyclical renewal, as if we were pagans. For the Lord’s resurrection is not a return to the status quo, after the unfortunate interruption of death for a couple of days. With the resurrection something completely new has happened, and everything is changed.

This is something that many of the Jews at the time of Christ understood very well, but many Christians have lost sight of. For those who believed in the resurrection, like Martha, Lazarus’ sister, saw it as something that would take place on the last day. (See John 11:24). Resurrection, in the words of the Anglican Bishop, Tom Wright, “was not to do with ‘life after death’, but with life *after* ‘life after death’”. It was, as we say in the Creed, “the life of the age to come”, the fully coloured picture of which this life here and now was only an outline. But Jesus’ reply to Martha was, “I am the resurrection”. In me the age to come is already present. Those who share in the life I have to give share in that life of the age to come, because in me that age is not to come – it has already come.

At every baptism we hear the words, “Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Romans 6:9). Each one of us is called to live in the light and the reality of that fact, and, even more, to bring that truth and light to all who are in the world around us. We begin every Liturgy with the exclamation, “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” because as we come together to worship we are sharers in that life which is the life of the age to come. But that life is not confined to our church worship. Each one of us carries that life, the life into which we were initiated at our baptism and with which we have been fed through Holy Communion, wherever we are. Each one of us is called to be a saint, someone through whom the light shines. “Let your light shine in such a way that seeing it, those around may give glory to your Father in heaven” says Christ to us, filling us with the light that shines in the darkness, and which the darkness cannot grasp.

It is a challenge for us now, in the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves. But it has always been a challenge. In a famous Christian work from the 2nd century, the “Letter to Diognetus”, we find it said, “The Christians... live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country...They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven.” And yet, says the anonymous author, these Christians who live consciously between and in both worlds, the here and now, and the world to come, “love all, even those who persecute them; enrich many, though they live in poverty and bless those who abuse them.” They bring the light and life of the world to come, of the resurrection, to all those who surround them.

Is it possible for us, too? Today's celebration poses that question in a different way. We celebrate St Mary of Egypt, a woman whose story sets before us the idea of repentance (*metanoia* = turning around and heading in the opposite direction) as an ideal. Having spent seventeen years living a life dedicated to sexuality in all its forms, in one moment, when she realises that her sins prevent her from entering the Church of the Holy Cross, she is convinced to turn her life completely around, to set out for the desert and spend almost fifty years there in isolation, seeing no-one, living in the presence of God alone, becoming the saint that God created her to be.

And then on the other hand we have the story in today's Gospel: Sts James and John, who have lived with Jesus for three years, according to the traditional length of Christ's ministry, seeing and hearing him daily, still show that they have totally failed to understand anything of what he has said and done. Indeed they don't even listen - as soon as they hear that he is headed for Jerusalem their thoughts leap ahead to the coming of the kingdom as they imagine it to be, and without hearing any more they set in motion their scheme to sideline St Peter, the third of Jesus' inner circle, and to claim the top jobs for themselves. Physical proximity to Christ is no guarantee of spiritual likeness, just as St Mary's physical isolation proves no barrier to her spiritual closeness to the Lord.

Here as we draw near in extraordinary circumstances to the end of the Fast, let us not lose sight of the truth that it is the Risen Lord who calls us to follow him, to live the life of the resurrection that he has given us wherever we may be, and in so doing to enable thousands around us to be saved by his grace. Amen.