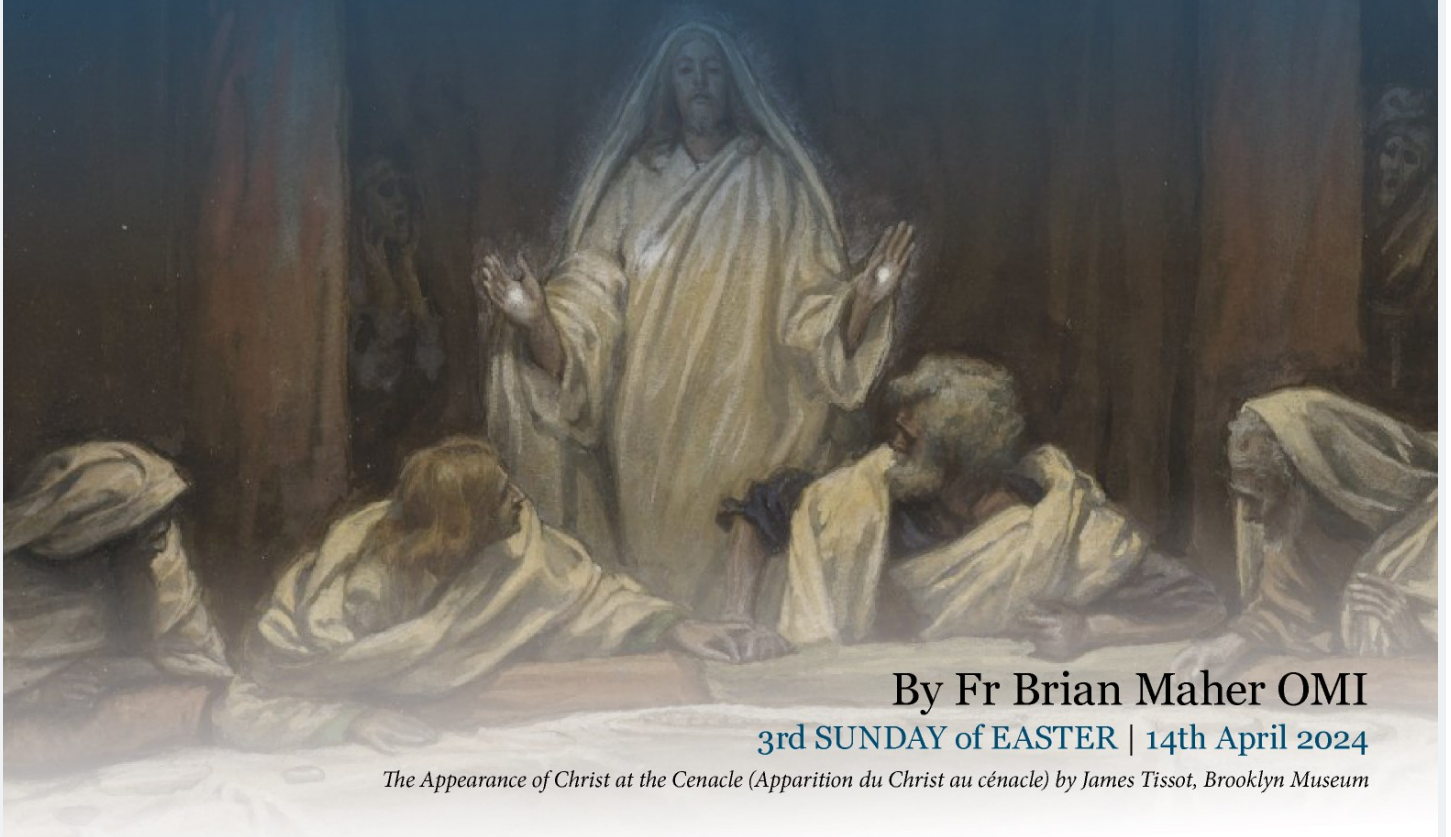


Gospel Reflection Sunday April 14th 2024 – Third Sunday of Easter

By Fr Brian Maher OMI

“The experience of Easter Sunday morning was so huge, so magnificent, so sudden, so unfathomable and so profound that it took time to sink-in and even begin to be understood.”



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3rd SUNDAY of EASTER | 14th April 2024

The Appearance of Christ at the Cenacle (Apparition du Christ au cénacle) by James Tissot, Brooklyn Museum

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I read somewhere that one species of whale takes twenty-five years to fully mature. That, in fact, makes us humans equal to the 'bowhead whale' in terms of time taken to mature, time dependant on parents and time in need of protection. These whales also, interestingly, have the biggest mouth of any animal in the world, and a particularly hard skull used to break through Artic ice sheets. I know people who claim that these two characteristics (big mouth and hard head) are also shared with humans! Amazingly, the bowhead whale lives for over two hundred years.

I cannot speak for bowhead whales, but I am reliably informed that humans take so long to mature because of the size and complexity of our brains, development of language, and consciousness. This does not make us 'slower' than other species of animal, rather, it is evidence of our ability to reflect and be reflexive. We are probably unique in that we can not only reflect on our existence and situations, but we can reflect on our

reflection! It makes us capable of much deeper understanding and leads to the formation of beliefs, values and morality.

We are all capable of moments of 'insight', when the lightbulb flashes on above our heads and we suddenly see what we failed to see for so long, and we are all capable of rushed decisions and actions which lead to disaster, but generally, at our best, we need time to think and reflect about ourselves and our situations.

The days and weeks after the Resurrection can be thought about in this way. The experience of Easter Sunday morning was so huge, so magnificent, so sudden, so unfathomable and so profound that it took time to sink-in and even begin to be understood. It is refreshing, I think, that the Gospels allow us to be with Peter and the others in this time of delay between experience and understanding rather than presenting us with a make-believe picture of instant understanding and immediate proclamation of the Resurrection.

We can, if we wish, see the Apostles and close friends of Jesus hiding away in their locked room, broken and terrified, and this is, of course, partly true. We can, if we wish, see them tortured by self-doubt, racked with guilt and shame at deserting him in his moment of greatest need and we can, if we wish, see them despairing of any future for his message. This too would be accurate to a great extent.

However, we can also, if we wish, view their locked room as their place of safety, where together they could think, reflect and pray about the incredible stories they were hearing. They had a responsibility to Jesus and his message; a responsibility to ensure that what they were hearing was true. And so they waited, probably very impatiently, in the locked room for Jesus to come to them. And he did come, and they, like wise stewards of his message, did not rush into belief or action, but waited, testing their own experience of the risen Jesus against the experience of others until they were sure that when they proclaimed "he has risen from the dead" they did so with certainty.

All of us like to present ourselves as strong, confident, certain and decisive – just look at our politicians! We are slow, even afraid, to allow others to witness our weakness and vulnerability. Doing so opens us to attack, ridicule and scorn and this, we think, is dangerous. How can we be believed or taken seriously if we don't speak with clarity and conviction?

The problem is that this image of ourselves is simply unreal. Those who pretend to be always right, always certain, always strong are, in fact, denying the very complexity of thought which separates us from all other animals. It would have been so easy for the writers of the Gospels to leave out the moments described in this Sunday's Gospel; to pretend that on Easter Sunday, Peter and the other disciples immediately believed, had instant clarity, and began to proclaim his Resurrection. It must have been so tempting to conveniently forget the doubts and disbelief of Thomas, or to simply leave out the three denials of Peter on Good Friday. If they were not included it would not change any of what happened on Good Friday or Easter Sunday. Peter, the 'rock' of Jesus, and Thomas, one of his inner circle of friends, would save face and be more credible later on.

But no! The Gospels allow us to be in the locked room with the disciples. The Gospels allow us to see and hear their fear, their doubts, their disbelief, their uncertainty. In a word the Gospels allow us to see their vulnerability and weakness.

Look at what we read this week: *"They were startled and frightened..."; "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"; "And while they still did not believe it..."*

For me, one of the great strengths of the Gospels is that we are allowed to walk with the first followers of Jesus on their entire journey to understanding and belief. We not only get their conclusion – that he rose from the dead – but we are allowed into the process that got them there.

Peter and the Apostles are strong enough in their belief and confident enough about what they are saying that they are not afraid to share with us that it was not always like that. Their strength and belief is all the stronger because it took time, and struggle, and a lot of reflection to get them there.

There is an important message here for us. Our journey to and with God will not be without times of doubt, times of fear, times even of disbelief. There will be times when we find ourselves "*startled and frightened*" by the state of our world, and there will be times when we are "*troubled*", and when "*doubts rise in your minds?*". There will be moments when we might have to honestly say, "*...and still (I) did not believe it.*"

By sharing their own journey to belief with us, Peter and the first disciples are giving us permission to undertake our own journey to the joy of the Resurrection honestly and without fear. In all of it Jesus says to us, "*Peace be with you.*"

It seems to me that central to the reflection of the Apostles was the fear that the Resurrection would be thought of as a 'vision' of Jesus to them, a kind of 'mystical experience' which might well be true but which was not 'real' in the flesh and blood sense. If the Resurrection was no more than a 'vision' of Jesus to his disciples, then while comforting, it did not change the fact that he was dead; that he died a sad and deserted criminal on a Roman cross of shame and humiliation.

In their locked room I feel certain that a lot of their discussion and prayer was trying to discern for themselves what exactly they were experiencing. Therefore, again and again, we find them returning to aspects of their experience of the risen Jesus which cannot be written off as 'a vision' or 'an internal mystical experience'. In this Sunday's Gospel we read: "*Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.*" and a bit later, "*Do you have anything here to eat?*" *They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.*"

While these words are being said to us, to support and encourage our belief, I can almost hear Peter and the others in their locked room saying these things to each other. It is part of their own discernment. I can imagine Peter saying to the others, "What we are experiencing cannot be a vision. I touched him and it was his body I felt. That cannot be a ghost!" and I can hear one of the others adding, "Did you see John give him the piece of fish. We all saw him eat it! A 'vision' cannot do that!"

Little by little, one small step at a time, it became more and more certain that the incredible did happen; that the Jesus they knew and loved had truly risen and was alive and back with them. He was different (John would call it 'glorified') but it was really him, body and blood, talking and eating with them.

The Gospel today concludes, "*Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures...*" This was not something that happened once and was then done; it is a process they were going through; it was their journey to belief in the Resurrection.

'Opening our minds' is not something that happens quickly or easily. To have 'an open mind' takes time and effort and struggle and many setbacks. So it was for Peter and the others in the locked room. Through fear, doubt, disbelief, anxiety and uncertainty they gradually came to the amazing conclusion that Jesus was "*...the Messiah; (that he) suffered, and (that he) rose from the dead on the third day.*"

They were the first "*witnesses to these things...*" and once their minds were opened and they realised that they were part of the eternal love story between God and creation, they never once looked back.

Every one of them spent the rest of their lives preaching and living the Gospel. They travelled to many lands and overcame many obstacles, always... always... witnessing to the Resurrection. In the end almost all of those in that locked room died for the Gospel they preached. They died because of the narrow, selfish, intolerant, closed minds of those with power and wealth.

We are today's witnesses to the Resurrection. Peter and the others call out to us over two thousand years; the risen Jesus calls out to us over two thousand years; "*Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.*"

So..... why are we troubled? Why do doubts rise in our minds? Can't we hear the risen Jesus say to us, "It is I myself! Touch me and see."?

Many thanks,

Brian.

If you have any comments, questions or thoughts on this scripture reflection, please feel welcome to email me at b.maher@oblates.ie

Gospel Sunday April 14th 2024, Third Sunday of Easter |

© Luke 24:35-48

It is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead

The disciples told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised Jesus at the breaking of bread.

They were still talking about all this when Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!' In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, 'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.' And as he said this he showed them his hands and feet. Their joy was so great that they still could not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.

Then he told them, 'This is what I meant when I said, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in the Psalms has to be fulfilled.' He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.'

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