

## Sixth Sunday of Easter

Today's Responsorial Psalm gives expression to the joy that the Jewish people experienced when they returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. Their minds naturally went back to the time when their ancestors first entered the Promised Land after being slaves in Egypt. They were re-living this experience as once again God was demonstrating his special love for them in a marvellous way. The Church joins in this hymn of praise and thanksgiving in this Easter season because of the wonderful way in which Jesus was brought back from death by God and restored to the fullness of life in the Resurrection.

Jesus is our saviour, rescuing us from many different ways in which we are enslaved: to routine, to meaningless drudgery, to sin and to despair. He does this as the Readings tell us by revealing God's love to us. Saint Bernard reflects on the ways in which Jesus comes into our lives and speaks of three: 'We know a threefold coming of the Lord. ... In the first coming, he came in the weakness of human nature, in this intermediate coming he comes in the power of the Spirit, and in the final coming he will come in the majesty of glory. Therefore this intermediate coming is, as it were, a way of connecting the first coming to the final coming. In the first coming Christ was our redeemer, in the final coming he will reveal himself as our life, in this present coming he is our rest and our consolation'(Bernard, Sermon 5 on Advent).

We read about Jesus' first coming in the gospels. We look forward to his final coming, which essentially takes place for each of us at the moment of our death, when we hope that he will come to raise us with him into the embrace of God. Now in this present life and here in this liturgy our focus is on what Saint Bernard calls his intermediate coming, that is to say on the many ways in which he comes to us 'in the power of the Spirit'. The author of Psalm 98 marvels at the ways in which God has demonstrated love to him and to his people. We are invited in this Easter season to reflect on the wonderful ways in which Jesus is continually coming into our lives as our 'rest and our consolation'.

Next Sunday is the Feast of the Ascension, so we are entering the final week of the Easter season in which the Church presents to us the many icon-like scenes which depict the ways in which the Risen Jesus comes into the lives of his disciples. We have read about Mary Magdalen weeping near the tomb and recognising Jesus when he called her by her name. This helped us think of the ways in which Jesus has made his presence known to us in intimate and personal ways. We have read about the disciples walking to Emmaus, and we thought of the times when our hearts, too, have burned within us as we have had the Scriptures explained to us. We have read where the disciples returned to Galilee and went back fishing, and we recalled those sacred places where we, too, have been touched by God. Most of the Gospel scenes after Jesus' death centre on the Eucharistic table, for it was there, more than anywhere else, that Jesus' followers became aware of his continued presence among them. Gathered here at the Eucharist, let us look again at the way the risen Jesus comes to be with us.

In the Second Reading John reminds his community that God is love and demonstrates this by reminding them that 'God sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes away our sin'(1John 4:10). John is writing in Greek and the word he uses here for sacrifice (Greek: *hilasmos*) refers to a specific sacrifice, which took place in the temple in the build up to the celebration of the New Year. New Year occurs at the full moon on the 14th day of the month of Tishri. Leading up to it is

a time of repentance, somewhat like our season of Lent. During this time, the people are expected to fast, to pray, to be reconciled with others and to give to those in need. They are encouraged to examine their lives and set them in order. These days reach their climax on the Day of Atonement. On this occasion the high priest enters the inner sanctuary of the temple. This has immense significance, because no one else was allowed into this inner sanctuary, and the high priest could enter only on this one occasion.

In the sanctuary stood the Ark of the Covenant. The cover of the ark was made of gold and two cherubim, one on each end, stood as warnings against anyone approaching the sacred place. Their wings spread out over God's throne, called the mercy seat. This is the word alluded to by John when he speaks of sacrifice in today's reading. The Jews believed that the invisible God was present on this throne. When the high priest brought all the sins of the people into the inner sanctuary and placed them before God, they were forgiven, purified away by God's loving mercy. The people had been repenting of their sins during the days of prayer and penance. Now the high priest brought these sins into contact with the mercy seat of God. Since nothing impure can contact the Holy One, the sins are burned away in the presence of divine mercy.

Jesus is the one who takes away the sins of the world. We celebrate this every time we come here to Mass. We begin each Mass recalling our sins and asking for forgiveness. Jesus, our high priest, takes us, sins and all, and places us there with him on the altar. The bread and wine symbolise our lives. The ordained priest is a sacrament of Christ the high priest. He accepts our offering and places it here on the altar. The bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ who offers himself to us in communion. In this way we are transformed into Christ who comes to us, as Saint Bernard says, as God's gift for our 'rest and consolation'.

It is important to remember that each of us in baptism was consecrated to God and anointed to be a priest, a prophet and a king. We all share in Christ's priesthood. That is why shortly, someone from among you will perform the priestly ministry of bringing your gifts to the altar - the bread made from many grains of wheat, symbolising your hopes; the wine made from many grapes symbolising your love as well as your suffering; and the collection representing hours of hard-earned money offered for the needs of the community.

Each one of you is a priest for your family and friends, coming here into God's sanctuary, bringing the cares and sorrows, the joys and hopes of all whom you love, and praying that the love of God will remove from us all anything that is hindering his grace in our lives. As the risen Jesus comes to us today let us open our hearts to him, as did his first followers. Let us listen to him as he says to us, in the words of today's Gospel: 'Remain in my love', and let us rejoice as we experience his closeness.