

## Easter Sermon

### Fr. Paul Check

[From today's second reading]: *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above... not...things that are on earth.* (Col 3:1,2)

One of my closest friends died a little over two weeks ago after a long and hard struggle with cancer. He was 80 years old, and had lived a good and full life as the world measures these things: professionally successful, many friends and acquaintances, influential in a variety of institutions and endeavors, well educated and traveled, sought after for his counsel, and so on...a legacy to admire. I only came to know him in more recent times—I actually met him here at the convent where once he attended Sunday Mass—by then, 12 or so years ago, the cancer was already at work and the battle was joined.

My friend had always been a practicing Catholic. But in the last chapter of his life, perhaps in part because of the cancer but not only that, his view of the world—and more precisely his understanding of the purpose of his life—changed, or better, it became clearer, richer. It was not that he valued his achievements and associations any less. On the contrary, he was more grateful for them because he now saw them in a different light...the light that *eternity* shines on the here and now, on the present that at once seems so solid and real, and yet at the same time, so quick to pass through our hands.

It is no part of the Catholic faith to diminish the goodness of this world. Our Lord was born into a human family and lived most of His life in hidden and ordinary circumstances; He healed the sick and wept at the death of His friend, Lazarus; He performed His first miracle at a wedding to, among other things, save a family from embarrassment and to bestow divine approval on human festivity. St Paul, whom I quoted a moment ago, told one of his spiritual sons, St Timothy, to stop only drinking water, but to take a little wine for the sake of his health. (I Tim 5:23) And though some may think or say otherwise in their misunderstanding or ignorance, the Catholic Church does not hold that sex is the devil's playground.

But as we heard in today's second reading, St Paul does recall that for those who are baptized, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has changed everything, because now death has been changed into life. He writes: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek things that are above...not on things that are on earth." In effect, Paul is saying: the goods of the world, even if they do not always come easily, are nonetheless easily appreciated, since it is in our nature to seek them: human friendship and love; food and drink...the delight of the senses in whatever form; personal accomplishment and reputation...we do not have to work at cultivating a desire for these things, because the desire for them is natural, i.e. proper to our humanity.

Yet St Paul is reminding us that there are things *not* of nature, *not* of this world, but of super-nature, of grace, that are not recognizable to the senses, but that are *no less real*, things for which we are fitted by virtue of Baptism—the gateway to eternal life—things that we must seek with much effort and perseverance, lest we lose or forfeit them...especially because the pull of the world is strong, immediate, unending. How easy it can be to dismiss such things, to *undervalue them*, even to scoff at them...to follow the example, as St Paul writes elsewhere, of those whose "end is destruction, [because] their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." (Phil 3:19) How easy to look around and to be reassured that the world is right and the Church is wrong, to try and fit Jesus Christ into my way of thinking instead of allowing Him to transform my mind and heart...to accept that death is final, or at least to live in such a way. Such, dear people, is to live without hope, except in the moment, in the present. Such is tragedy.

"But our citizenship is in heaven," St Paul says, "and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself." (Phil 3:20,21) This is the meaning of Easter Sunday, because it is the meaning of the Resurrection: the central tenet of our Catholic Faith. Our citizenship is in Heaven.

After the preaching and example of her Master and Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the Catholic Faith enlightens the children of God (and didn't Jesus tell us that unless we become His children in spirit and in truth, we will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven? [cf. Mt 18:3 and Jn 4:23]) with a simple but decisive message: religion is not simply medicine for what afflicts us; it is not first a remedy for evil; it is not something to which we appeal only when all else has failed...no.

Jesus said, "I have come that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly," (Jn 10:10)...and through faith, hope and charity, He intends that abundant life to begin now. And so for Jesus, and therefore for Christians—if we are truly faithful to Christ—our religion enriches, ennobles, and gives meaning to life, it gives hope that death is not the end, that the senses do not tell us everything there is to know about the human condition...and that we can find peace and purpose amidst the trials and sorrows that inevitably confront each person...that joy, and not just a fleeting satisfaction or pleasure, can be ours when we embrace the goods in this world in their proper measure, when they are ordered to the true the lasting good of Heaven, of eternity, of the Resurrection.

Standing at the center of our hope and of the secure promise the Gospel offers to the faithful soul is the Resurrected Christ, the only one who can tell me who I am, why I am here, how I can find joy, and what will happen when I die. Only Jesus Christ is our life.

I return to my friend for just a moment. What was it that changed or became more plain for him as time passed, as he knew that the cancer would inevitably spread and claim his life? It was simply this: more and more, he started to think about himself now longer as a fixture in this world, but as a citizen of Heaven...and this is the way he lived: for Jesus Christ. This irreplaceable understanding, this wisdom, led to a greater self-mastery, self-forgetfulness, and self-giving on his part, and thus he grew in charity and holiness. For him the resurrection of the body was not something hazy or vague in his mind and heart, to commemorate once a year on Easter Sunday, but a sure and certain hope that shaped his life. "These things I have spoken to you," Our Lord said, "that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (Jn 15:11) My friend knew this joy, Easter joy, and he shared it with me, and with many others.

Today, the Resurrected Christ invites us to put aside worldly ambition, to avoid investing immoderate expectation in the here and now, and instead to know and see ourselves as He knows and loves us, and always to live as citizens of Heaven.