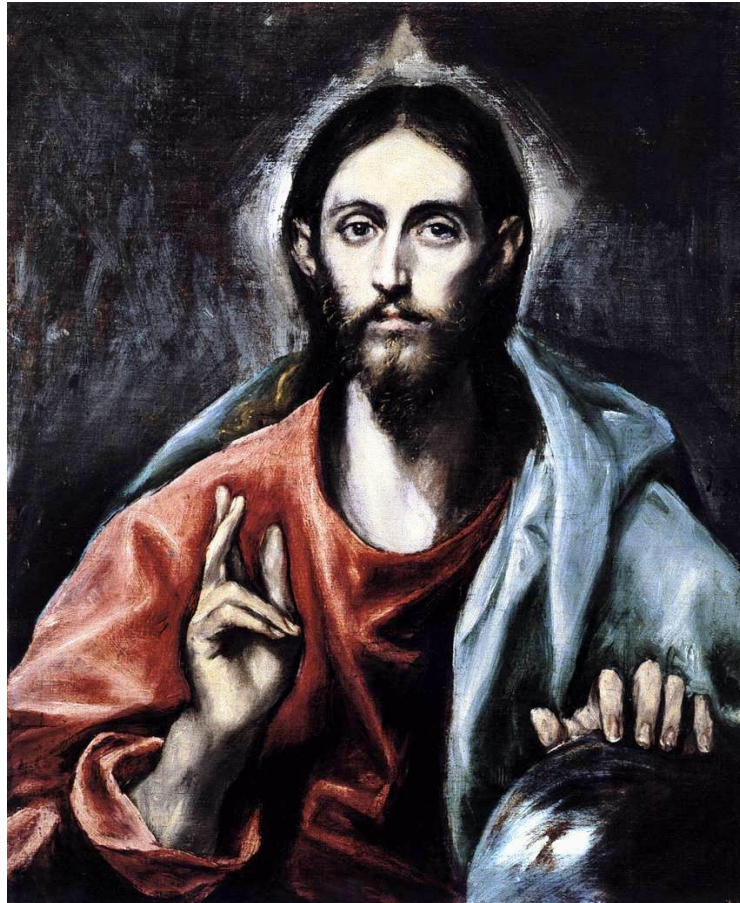


Sunday Readings



Christ, the Saviour, reigns

EASTER DAY

EASTER DAY

*Jesus is Risen!*¹

introduction

We gather to celebrate God's victory, in Christ, over the power and attraction of death. The gospel for Easter Day is the foundation story about how disciples of Jesus came to a transformed faith and new life. This is the kind of community of hope, into which the baptised have been incorporated at Easter. Now they are themselves committed to realise that community through their own practice. One journey ends, another journey begins.

first reading: **Acts 10 : 34a, 37 - 43**²

[Gentiles hear the good news]

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality;(34a) . . . That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:(37) how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.(38) We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;(39) but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,(40) not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.(41) He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.(42) All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."(43)

The Book of Acts focuses on the mission of Jesus' disciples beyond his absence from them. Peter's address to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, marks the start of the disciples' movement outwards from Jerusalem to the Gentile world.³ Peter had lacked either understanding or courage to proclaim publicly what God had done in and through Jesus, until the moment after Jesus' resurrection, when the Holy Spirit baptised and empowered the apostles to speak.⁴ It is *the Holy Spirit* who directs Peter to the house of Cornelius and would

1 Front Cover illustration: El Greco: Christ the Saviour.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 [v.34a. ff] Peter in the household of Cornelius. Cornelius is a *Gentile* and a '*God-fearer*'. The evangelist considers his conversion of great importance. He gives a long and detailed treatment of the event. The incident is again told in *Ac.11:1-18*, where Peter is forced to justify his actions before the Jerusalem community. It is alluded to again in *Ac.15:7-11*, where at *the Jerusalem Council*, Peter supports Paul's missionary activity among the Gentiles. Peter, finally presents the Christian '*good news*' (*Ac.11:4-43*) and a *pentecostal experience* undergone by Cornelius' household, before they receive baptism (*Ac.11:44-48*). Peter's speech typifies early Christian preaching to Gentiles. The revelation of God's choice of Israel to be the people of God, didn't mean God withheld the divine favour from other people.

4 *Ac.2:1-4*

guide in detail the admission and baptism of the first Gentiles to become followers of Jesus' way.⁵ Peter proclaims a message which has *'the power for life-giving'*, or, *'grace'*. It is a message in continuity with the good news of Jesus; indeed of the whole Israelite tradition of, *the Torah* and *the Prophets* (v.43). Jesus of Nazareth is God's revelation of God's plan for the destiny of humanity through Israel. Consequently, the ministry of Jesus is an integral part of God's revelation. This explains why the early Christian communities were interested in conserving the historical substance of the ministry of Jesus; a tradition leading to the production of the four gospels (v.38).

The apostles' testimony was not restricted to the resurrection of Jesus, but also included his historical ministry (v.39). This witness, however, was theological in character; *the Twelve*, divinely mandated as prophets, were empowered to interpret his sayings and deeds in the light of his redemptive death and resurrection. The meaning of these words and deeds was to be made clear to the developing Christian community as the bearer of *'the WORD of salvation'*.⁶ Peter's proclamation is a sign of a continuing message as well as a continuing power. The apostle is, *the vehicle of the Spirit*, bearing witness to Christ in the household of a non-Israelite. It is part of the general movement recorded in *the Book of Acts*, in which the proclamation shifts from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, to, *'the ends of the Earth'*.⁷

response: Psalm 118 : 1 – 2, 16 – 17, 22 – 24⁸

[a song of victory]

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!(1)
Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."(2) . . .
The right hand of the Lord is exalted;
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.(16)
I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.(17) . . .
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.(22)
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.(23)
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it."(24)*

5 Ac.10:38, & 10:44-47

6 Ac.1:21-26

7 In terms of geographic distance from the ancient old world, Aotearoa-New Zealand marks the end of the line of that extension.

8 Ps.118 is a thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a victory procession of the king and the people into the temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (vv.1-4), the speaker describes how the people confidently implored God's help when hostile peoples threatened its life; God's rescue is told (vv.15-18). Then follows a dialogue at the temple gates, between the priests and the speaker as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (vv.19-25).

Because of the alternative reality made possible by the gift of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Christian communities can take up the prayer-form of praise and thanks-giving used in Israelite tradition. The backdrop to the speaker's song is a situation of need and trouble. But it is trouble that has been recently resolved by a life-giving action by the Lord God. The speaker affirms that God indeed gives life, in a world where death seemed to have the strongest sway.

'The stone the builders rejected' (v.22) is a proverb. What is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. The *'stone'* may originally have meant the foundation stone, or capstone, of the temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ. Believers, old and new, sing such songs (v.24) because God hears and answers the cries of hurt and grief and resolves the trouble. The prayer expresses the speaker's confidence in God's intervening to give life. The song is not about the normal outcomes of trouble. It is about the decisive transformation made possible by this God who causes new life where no life had seemed possible. Christians interpret the Easter events as continuing God's transforming action. God took, *'the rejected One'* (Jesus) and made him the foundation of the new structure. The earliest Christian preaching of the resurrection found in *Psalm 118*, their community's interpretation of Jesus' practice.

second reading: Colossians 3 : 1 – 4

[the new life in Christ]

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.(1) Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on Earth,(2) for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.(3) When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.(4)

As in the first reading, the text from Colossians announces God's victory over the power of death.⁹ The action of God brings *'glorification'* for all God's people. The resurrection of Jesus is THE event that makes a radical style of new life possible. Christians have died with Christ and have, *"been raised up in his company"* in their baptism (v.1). Although they share Christ's risen life – that risen life is hidden and incomplete. Only Christ's return, will complete the transformation of the Christian's present unglorified, or incomplete state. This tension is the key to Paul's ethics.

In the present, disciples of the risen Christ keep their attention on the *'higher things'* in store for them (v.2). This hope sustains their Christian practise. The promise of a full share in Christ's risen life, should encourage disciples to assume their Christian responsibilities to change the world. Already in the present

⁹ [Col.3:1-4] By retaining the message of the gospel that the risen, living Christ is the source of their salvation, the Colossians will be free from false religious evaluations of the things of the world (vv.1-2). They have died to these; but one day when Christ appears, they will live with Christ in the presence of God (vv.3-4).

time believers can participate in the resurrected life of Jesus. Their understanding and behaviour are based on God's victory, in Jesus, over death. Even if the faithful disciple already shares in the resurrection life, a final revelation of Christ's future glory still awaits. That revelation will also contain the glory for those who believe (v.4).

gospel reading: John 20:1-9¹⁰

[the resurrection of Jesus]

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.(1) So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."(2) Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.(3) The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.(4) He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.(5) Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,(6) and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.(7) Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;(8) for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.(9)

It is still dark when Mary came to the tomb according to John.¹¹ The early part of John's gospel, shows the possibility of a movement from, 'no faith' towards 'faith'. For example, the mother of Jesus, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the royal official.¹² Now at the end of Jesus' story there are three more examples – the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdala and later there will be the story of Thomas. The focus shifts from the possibility of faith, in the early chapters of John's account, to the completion of the journey to faith here! John, the evangelist looks back from the vantage-point of the John's community, describing the end of the story of Jesus. Here's the foundational experience of three people whose meeting with the Risen Lord led them to faith. The account begins with Mary Magdala going to the tomb,¹³ and discovering it empty, returns to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple (John).

The role of women varies from one society to another, but generally what women do is regarded as less important. This may explain why it was less dangerous for women to be by-standers at the crucifixion, or for them to go to the tomb first. Mary's love overcame fear of death and society's prejudice. She was a strong woman. Jesus died for love. Mary's source of courage was the

10 [Jn.20:1-9] The story of the empty tomb is found in both Matthew and Luke; John's version seems to be a fusion of the two.

11 According to Mark the sun had risen. Matthew describes it as "dawning." Luke refers to early dawn. Mary sees the stone removed, not the empty tomb.

12 Cf. Jn. 2:1-4:54

13 Jn. 20:1-2

courage to love. Women today identify with Mary's courage. According to Israelite law, the testimony of a woman wasn't valid. Mary's testimony is validated later by the testimony of the Beloved Disciple and Peter.¹⁴ That was important for John's community, whose journey from 'no faith' to 'faith' depended on the announcement of Mary and the foundation experience of the first apostles.

Mary and the two male disciples were looking for Jesus' body, but they didn't find it in the tomb. Earlier when Jesus was asked by *the Sadducees* (*who did not believe in the resurrection of the body*), he said, ". . . have you never read in the *Book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him and said: 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?'* *God is not God of the dead – but God of the Living!*"¹⁵

Jesus understood his life was a continuation of and belonging to the same movement as the story of Sarah and Abraham etc.. For Jesus, the same power of God which was at work among the Israelites' ancestors, was at work in him. The scriptures confirmed it! The God of the living was named by Jesus as the God whose power animated his practice. The same God, who after raising up a people from slavery and oppression through Moses, would be able to raise up other bodies.

The Beloved disciple has now seen all the signs of death – tomb and wrapping clothes – both empty now.¹⁶ He saw and believed. The faith of this "*founding father*", and model disciple of John's community, came from an awareness that death could not hold Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike Lazarus, who had to be untied, Jesus was free of the reality of death. A community founded on such an experience has its own journey to make. It is nourished further in this faith by reflection on the Scriptural record of the practice of the first disciples.

If someone dies for others and nobody follows their ideas, we could speak as though that person doesn't rise. Jesus says that when they hear his voice the dead will rise. He meant that when his message of God's reign of love is heard by all and a new society is created, all those who formerly lived that message are going to rise again. The crucifixion doesn't make any sense unless there is a resurrection. If death isn't conquered it doesn't do any good to conquer anything else in the world. Paul says the last enemy to be conquered is death. When there is justice throughout the Earth, then will come the resurrection of the dead.¹⁷

14 [vv.6-8] Something about the state of the burial cloths caused the beloved disciple to believe. Perhaps the details emphasised that the grave had not been robbed.

15 *Mk.12:18-27*

16 *Jn.20:8-9*

17 The error of twenty-first century Christianity, has been to believe we can enjoy the reigning of God without changing the world. Many theologians say there is no other world than this one. We know almost nothing about resurrection, so we mustn't go on about it. I believe that the tombs of all those who loved others, are empty!

for sharing:¹⁸

- *The gentiles hear the good news.* Comment on Acts 10 : 34a, 37 – 43
- *The new life in Christ.* Comment on Colossians 3 : 1 – 4
- *The resurrection of Jesus.* Comment on John 20 : 1 – 9

prayer:¹⁹

*On this most holy day, Lord God,
through the triumph of Your only-begotten Son
You have shattered the gates of death
and opened the way to everlasting life.
Grant, we beseech You, that we
who celebrate the festival
of the Lord's resurrection
may rise to a new and glorious life
through the quickening power of Your Spirit.
We ask this through
our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.*

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18 Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.

19 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.