

# Remembering closeness

# Christ's

One of the most striking images from the Book of Revelation is John's description of the lamb standing as though slain (cf. Rev 5:6). That image is tied to the Easter stories in his Gospel: the glorified and resurrected Jesus still contains the marks of his crucifixion. The victory has been won, but it could only happen through the suffering and death of Christ's cross. To put it differently: Easter Sunday is impossible without Good Friday. The marks of Good Friday remain because, as is the case especially in John's Gospel, the cross is the moment of Jesus' glorification.

The heart of the Christian life really is the willingness to conform ourselves to Christ's way – that is, to let the paschal mystery work itself out in us, not only individually, but also in the life of the whole Church. It means that the truth of the Resurrection accounts ought to help us bend our will more and more to the will of God in our own historical moment. In fact, nostalgia has no place in the Christian message. It is not our luxury to look back, but to see how God is drawing the Church in her particular moment closer to himself. Our moment may be a struggle, but the Church is asked to have constantly at her heart the response of Jesus: "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

In our current moment, then, we cannot look back and wish for times as they were even a month ago. The moment Christianity becomes nostalgic is the moment it loses trust and hope in Christ. Rather, our moment will reveal things we may not want to see about ourselves, society and the Church. Institutions that have been mainstays of the Church for years may cease to be after this crisis passed. No one can really know what the future holds except that what yesterday was no longer is.

But it is precisely in the darkness that Christian hope finds her closeness with Christ. A weird paradox of Christianity – especially in the Resurrection narratives – is the interplay between both the closeness and distance of Jesus. It is important to note that in neither of these is he absent. Whether he's close, like with the apostles eating fish, or distant, as in his command to Mary Magdalene to not cling to him, there is never an absence. The final act in which Jesus "distances" himself from us is that of the Ascension, but it's so that a new closeness with him by the power of the Holy Spirit may be realized. What was particular to the first disciples now is universal for the Church.

Though Jesus can appear distant in the present moment, he is actually close by virtue of the Holy Spirit, who makes Christ present to all of his followers. This same Holy Spirit is breathed onto the apostles in the upper room where Jesus then proclaims, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21). The Holy Spirit now is the one who animates us along Jesus' way, to send the Church as he was sent by the Father: through the cross toward the joy of the Resurrection.

The Church is always on her way toward the Resurrection and is always enduring the cross. The lamb appearing slain is, in a way, an image of the Church as well. The Church will always be both crucified and redeemed at the same time. These two mysteries cannot be unravelled from each other. They always go hand in hand.

In our particular moment, we are going through a crucifixion, yes, but always in the hope of being raised to new life. This is a time when we are experiencing the distance of God – the fact that we are unable to go to Mass is a pain felt by too many. But this distance is not an absence. This is a time to renew our hope that Christ really is victorious over death so that as we go through suffering and the experience of the distance of God, we know that Christ is here, too. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide us, the Church, along his way. And we

know the end of the story. Christ is risen and asks us to go along his way so to cooperate in his act of salvation. Remember well the words of St. Paul: "In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24). This is the task of the whole Church.

It is true that the Church is able to take up this task most fully when she is united with the Lord through the gift of the Eucharist. By receiving his body, we are built up to be more like him and to follow his way more closely. But even though the closeness of the Eucharist may not be something most are able to partake in at this moment, the grace of that last Eucharist we received continues to reign in our hearts as we strive to cooperate with his mission of redeeming the world. We must remember that the Lord is still close in that gift. Every time the Eucharist is offered, the whole Church is present. When the Mass is offered, our worries, our sufferings, our joys and our sacrifices are all lifted up into Christ's sacrifice. We are present even though we can't be there physically. Though we may feel a distance from the Mass, the Mass is still working out its grace for the whole Church.

Finally, let us take hope in the words of St. Faustina, the Polish nun and Divine Mercy messenger: "I have come to know that holy Communion remains in me until the next holy Communion. A vivid and clearly felt presence of God continues in my soul. ... My heart is a living tabernacle in which the host is reserved. I have never sought God in some far-off place, but within myself. It is in the depths of my own being that I commune with God" ("Divine Mercy in My Soul," No. 1302). St. Faustina helps us see how Jesus' promise is always fulfilled: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). He never leaves us, he is always with us.

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