

Meditation for Easter 3 26 April 2020

Words fail when I try to convey the excitement and anticipation of the Easter service of the Holy Fire ceremony in the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, built by Constantine over the authentic site of the Resurrection. This year, of course, it was quiet but normally thousands throng the church, standing on every available ledge, clinging to pillars, hanging from balconies. It seems that the whole world is here – there are Christians of every hue from every corner of the universal church. The focal point is the *edicule*, the house which covers and protects the cave-tomb of Christ. The Orthodox patriarch as the bishop of Jerusalem, breaks the seal on the tomb and prays in the deep darkness inside. The church is filled with both shadow and expectation. Awesomely, a new light is kindled in the darkness of the tomb. It is passed out of the tomb and spreads like wildfire among the pilgrims, each of whom has a bundle of 33 candles representing the years of the earthly life of Christ. There are more than three thousand people, so that makes 100,000 candles in church! Their tapers become a radiant torch. The darkness is overcome and dispelled; the whole basilica is filled not only with light but with fire! Crashing church bells toll enthusiastically and, amidst dancing the great noise of ululations and exultant cheers resound. The Holy Fire flaming from the cave – representing the risen life of Christ among us – is a powerful symbol that no darkness can quench the light of Christ...







What is most striking is the fact that the worshippers do not stand around contemplating the fire of the Risen Christ, nor remain in church to enjoy and savour the symbol and the reality for themselves. The fire is taken quickly outside to the waiting crowds. It goes straight out to the ordinary streets and alleys of the city. It is taken to the elderly and housebound. Runners take lamps bearing the Flame out of the city far and wide: to Christians on the occupied West Bank prevented from getting into Jerusalem each Easter, by plane to Orthodox in Greece, Russia, and Cyprus ...



This is true contagion

This is the contagion of hope. For the Christians of Jerusalem, the flame of hope is highly contagious – passing from one to one – you can't keep it to yourself! The Christians here live their lives unselfconsciously and faithfully. The Holy Fire is a sign and promise of great comfort to the local Christians in the Holy Land. As one Jerusalemite Christian put it: 'In a Good Friday world, we seek to live Easter.'

This challenges me when we hear daily talk of 'containing the infection' or 'reducing the contagion.' There are some things in life that *should* be passed on, unreservedly. We are challenged to ask: how infectious is my faith? It is often said faith is 'caught not taught.' It is acquired by being 'picked up' from Christian lives, not by instruction. People turn to Christ because they see for themselves the evidence of the resurrection in courageous words and deeds of Christians.

Let us hold onto this:

- Faith is transmissible
- Kindness is contagious
- Hope is infectious
- Humour is catching
- Courage is catchable
- Compassion can 'go viral'

In Matthew's gospel on Easter Day the angel at the tomb says: '*come and see*' the place where he lay' – then added '*go and tell*' (Matthew 28:6,7).

Let us ask ourselves:

What can I spread this week?

To whom?

A two-way process

But this works two ways: we should pass on the infectious nature of kindness and love, but we should also be ready to receive – to receive from God and from others. Unfortunately we cling onto spiritual PPE (of course in the present situation physical PPE is essential). Spiritual PPE – personal protective equipment – represents the barriers we erect to keep God, and others, at a safe distance. Of course we want God close, but not *too* close – in case he asks something of us! We need to relearn the art of receptivity: to lower our-self-protective barriers and guards, defensive attitudes that close us off from God and from others and make us retreat into ourselves. We need to take off our 'masks' – the images of ourself we want to send out to God and others, behind which our true self hides. We need to set aside our strategies of avoidance – the methods we develop over time to keep God and others at bay. In prayer, for example, this might mean we resort only to reading scripture or written prayers because waiting in total silence before God, with no props at all, is far too risky! With others, for example, a strategy that insists that we are the ones in control and we are the ones who do the talking prevents us from deep listening

to others, and hinders the ability to receive different worldviews or different stand-points. The key thing here is to lower our defence mechanisms, become susceptible to the Divine, vulnerable to God, and ready to receive from others.

In the final chapter of Matthew's Gospel we see this two-way process. In Galilee the disciples first worship the Risen Christ (28:17). They stand in wonder and amazement and receive from Christ his energizing, empowering love. Hope is rekindled in their hearts.

Then they hear the words of Jesus: 'Go into all the world and make disciples...I am with you always, to the close of the age' (28:19,20).

Looking at this through the lens of today's metaphor, the risen Jesus is saying something like: 'take the risk of divine infection – let hope rise in your hearts and flood your soul. Catch the bug of divine love. Then, be contagious: spread the love, share the hope, pass on the flame!'